

## **The social aspect of digital storytelling; a case study: Jefke Tuf, an interactive documentary about soul carers then and now in a former coalmining community.**

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**Abstract:** This paper provides the main findings of a *digital storytelling and cultural mapping* - project that took place the second half of 2014 within the community of Winterslag (a former coalmining village in Limburg, Belgium). *Jefke Tuf* ended up being a transmedia project. It is an interactive walk that leads you through the village, it is also a non-linear documentary, a radio broadcast, an interactive book and an exhibition, but it is above all a project that gained the trust and the support of the community, which took part in it.

The challenges met within this project concentrated on gaining the trust of the community, getting the members of the community involved, bringing a mix of participants together marking the story of the boroughs, finding a way to not intimidate the participants whilst capturing their story, looking for the most convenient inquiry technique, choosing a digital storytelling tool that was most appropriate to map the gathered stories bringing them together in an interactive documentary and searching for an image that threaded through the stories collected and the cultural history of the boroughs. *Jefke Tuf*, a nurse taking care of the miners and driving through Winterslag on her Solex to visit families at the time the mine was still up and running became the bounding metaphor. This created another layer to the project. A social one, the one of taking care for one another in today's complex world. Thus through mapping stories opening up some cultural heritage, *Jefke Tuf* gave something back to the community.

### **Paper:**

#### **Introduction**

Four elements are key in what follows: sociocultural heritage, community involvement, digital storytelling and narratives.

When mapping the intangible cultural heritage of the community in the case study presented here, the sociocultural dimension of heritage proved to be important. The different sociocultural layers within the community evolved over time but had a common history and a bounding factor: the coalmine. This evolution - that still continues - has influence on how residents live together today within the community. Thus this part of intangible heritage is constantly changing and enriched by each generation. As mentioned in UNESCO's definition (2003) *Intangible heritage is transmitted from generation to generation, and is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history. It provides people with a sense of identity and continuity, and promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity* (Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Art.2.1).

Mapping, recording and analyzing memories, sociocultural aspects and past experiences enable us to explore as well as present the DNA of that community (Schall 2010, p. 168; Cultural Mapping Kit 2010 p. 8). To map these stories seem to be a convenient tool, since *stories are the main way we make sense of things, whether in thinking of our lives as a progression leading somewhere or in telling ourselves what is happening in the world* (Culler 2011, P. 83).

This kind of mapping cannot be done without the engagement of the residents. Thus in order to make the mapping work, community involvement is needed throughout the whole process, from defining the frame of the mapping project, over the gathering of sociocultural material, to the collection of stories and the launch of the mapping results (Brodwick 2012, pp. 146-148).

When sharing these results and stories at present, using the online and mobile media seems almost evident, due to the fact that content provided on these platforms became highly accessible to a wide audience thanks to the vast evolution of online communication and creative tools lately (Alexander 2011, pp. 3-4). But not only accessibility is a plus. This digital way of telling stories also opens new perspectives in involving an audience and engaging a community in mapping intangible cultural heritage that risks to fade if not marked one way or another.

Though, in this project the digital storytelling dimension is part of a bigger picture, since the results of the mapping are told across different media, online as well as offline, in order to give every resident/visitor of the community the chance to read, listen, see, hear and experience the stories in one way or another. Hence we can speak of a Transmedia project in the sense of “across media” as defined in literature by Henry Jenkins and others (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins 2007; Scolari & Irbus 2014). Each medium can stand on itself (one can listen to the interviews on the radio) and presents a specific part of the content, thus gives richer information in combination with another medium (walk through the community, see the houses and listen to the stories behind these houses). In such way the combination of the different media layers offer a more holistic experience to the user.

## **The Case study**

### **Setting**

The Transmedia-journey starts in Winterslag, a former coalmining village in Limburg (Belgium) now part of the city of Genk. Winterslag consists of an old mine site, a shopping area around de Vennestraat and 3 boroughs - called *cités* - that are architecturally still relatively intact. The *cités* were developed parallel to the recruitment of the mining company.

As we speak the old mine site has been renovated and turned into a cultural and creative hub, called C-mine, with cultural and creative companies and organisations. But for this project we zoom in on the Vennestraat and the 3 *Cités* (see illustration 1). The coalmine production started in 1917 and went on till 1988. In 1911 architect Adrien Blomme was assigned to develop the first *cit * at the east site of the mine buildings. Blomme at first was inspired by the English garden district and ditto cottage style. After the First World War he looked for an architecture that fitted better with the Flemish traditions. The social hierarchy was not explicit recognizable. The engineers and the employees had spacious, well-developed houses near the mine. The director of the mine had a house a part, outside the *cit * near the Steamer creek with an excellent view on the mine buildings. The workers lived in smaller well-constructed houses, with a sense for detail and lined up next to another. Mark that the first *cit * was mainly built for employees and workers from the highest grade, and almost exclusively used by Belgians. This was still the case after the two other *cit s* had been put into place.



illustration 1: 3 Minecités Winterslag, Keunen, P (2010) Mijncité: met de mijncités naar de 21ste Eeuw. Stebo. p. 58.

The second cité has been constructed between 1922 and 1925, solely for workers, mostly with a Central and Eastern European background (Slovenian, Polish, Italian...). A raster pattern with slightly bowed streets starting from a church square characterise the cité. The houses are built four with variation at the façade and the roof. This cité is divided from the first one by a railway and only accessible by a bridge at the Noordlaan. Thus it became an isolated workers enclave.

Due to the big economical immigration movement just after the Second World War a fourth cité (the third cité was never build) was created. After the mine accident at Marcinelle in 1956, the Italian government did no longer want workers to move to Belgium to work in the mines, thus the number of Italian immigrants drew back and the mining company started to recruit in Turkey and Nord Africa (Morocco, Algeria). 30 houses build for railway workers in 1927, which did not connect with cité 1 and 2 where integrated in the new cité. This cité differs completely with Blomme's garden designs. A raster pattern is used with strait streets and only 4 types of houses. So there is not much variety, but it must be said that the technical quality of these houses is better than the ones in cité 2 (Keunen 2010 pp. 58-61; Martens 1989 pp. 103-104, Delabre et al. 2009).

Hence architecture and social structure of the cités evolved over time. It resulted in a multicultural community up until today. It is a lively community where mixes of backgrounds with their own traditions live next to each other. In the early days the mine was the bounding factor between these nationalities, but what brings them together now? What stories are hidden behind those doors? Intrigued by these questions a young photographer Boumediene Belbachir who lives and was raised in the 3th cité, and Stefan Kolgen, a digital storyteller joined force to learn via those stories what the thrives the community socially through past and present experiences, and thus create an alternative mapping of the life in the cités of Winterslag, but not without the involvement of the residents of the 3 cités.

### **Engaging the community**

So the first challenge to overcome was finding a way to get the community of Winterslag engaged. And that was not an easy one. Due to the fact that the community had been consulted regularly for, because of the regeneration of the mining district, they were not so keen on getting involved in yet another project. Since most projects enter into the community, the project leaders gather their information, and they go out again fast. The result is not always shared in a proper way with the residents. Therefore the residents tend to question the importance to participate in a community project. Although as Brodwick (2012) realised when doing community projects: *the sense of personal relationship or perceived direct value is a powerful motive for participation. Similarly, when an arts organisation is viewed as making significant contributions to the wellbeing of the community, there is a far broader spectrum of potential donor than is typical* (p. 28). Furthermore *to be effective, successful engagement must be done with the community, based on reciprocal, mutual beneficial relationships with the organisations or the communities being served* (Brodwick 2012 p. 33). So instead of going to the community with a set project, it is important to see how the residents and organisations of the community can be engaged in the whole process from beginning to end, that there is something in it for the community and that after care is included.

Engaging the residents of Winterslag in this project went slowly but proved to be solidly in the end. Boumediene and Stefan worked on different levels that were equally important. They met with key players such as the community development officer who knows all social in's and out's of Winterslag, or the members of the local history circle *Heemkring Heidebloemke* who could offer information about the socio-historical part of the place. And they spent a lot of time Winterslag by just talking to people when having coffee at the local cafés or while walking through the cités. Both levels were crucial to develop trust and interaction with the residents. Both needed time and care.

Because the artists wanted the residents to be engaged in the whole process of the project, its outline was still vague when they started. But it got shaped and more defined along the way, through their informal talks with residents and through their visits with the key players mentioned above. The information gathered and a lead by Eddy Witmolders, the community development officer, led the artists to the importance of focussing on the caring of the soul. People need to get their story told. But the artists realised they felt short explaining the project in a clear way. So maybe they needed a metaphor, or recognisable image that could clarify where they were aiming at?

### **Pin down part of the intangible cultural heritage of Winterslag**

Heemkring Heidebloemke and the city archives of Hasselt offered the solution. The local heritage circle seemed to have the best knowledge gathered on the topographical and social aspects of Winterslag's history. This knowledge pointed to *Het kliniekske*, the mine clinic St. Elisabeth operating between 1924 and 1979. A file at the city archives offered some extra information about the clinic and its whereabouts. 4 nuns of the congregation *Zusters van Liefde* helped the doctors and took care of the sick and wounded. One of them, sister Marie-Josephe, know as *Jefke Tuf*, worked from 1968 onwards at the clinic and visited the miner families in Winterslag on her Solex<sup>1</sup> (Habex 2013 pp. 34-36; Rijksarchief Hasselt T1742 Inventaris van het archief van de steenkoolmijn van Winterslag). Everybody knew her. She was more than just a nurse; she was also a social worker *avant la lettre*. Next to her nursing job sister Marie-Josephe took time to listen to what bothered/occupied the residents of the cités. As such *Jefke Tuf* was the metaphor the artists needed. The nurse was still known by the older generation of the community and for the other generations a nurse is a caring person.

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<sup>1</sup> Part of her name 'Josephe', in dialect *Jefke*, and the fact that she cruised through the cités with her Solex motorcycle, in dialect a *Tufke*, made that people called her *Jefke Tuf*.



Hence Jefke Tuf became the leading lady of the project. Stickers, with a styled image<sup>2</sup> (see illustration 2) were made and distributed in the community.



illustration 2 styled image of JefkeTuf

A website, a Twitter feed and a Facebook Page informed about the progress of the project. These tools and word of mouth were important to get the project message across and to engage residents to take part in the project in one way or another. Jefke Tuf was talk of the town. The project started to live in the cités. Residents addressed the artists directly and asked how they could be involved. So when Jefke Tuf was brought alive at the bi-annual community feast in September, everyone wanted to talk to her and be portrayed with her (see illustration 3).



illustration 3: Winterslag Feest, photographer: Boumediene Belbachir

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<sup>2</sup> Sister Marie-Joseph might still be alive, but the artists could not trace her, so for the stickers they used a styled image with another model, for the project.

What seemed hard at the beginning of the project became easier now. Residents volunteered to be interviewed. Within the available time frame and resources, 14 stories were gathered, which could have been more since people were eager to participate.

The following aspects were taken into account when choosing the interviewees: make sure that the 3 cités were covered, have the viewpoint of different generations on living in the cités then and now, and make sure that there was a mix of nationalities/cultural backgrounds. Thus the project is equally spread over the Vennestraat and the 3 cités, and portrays the story of a first generation Moroccan worker as well as that of a newcomer living in the house of his grandparents.

### **Gathering the stories**

The stories were captured through audio interviews and photographs. Since the interview had to reveal the inner story of the interviewee an approach was needed that made them feel at ease. An inquiry technique that seemed to come close to that was offered by narrative inquiry. This approach offers the interviewee the chance to talk in an open way (Miller 2000; Rosenthal 1993; Flick 2005). Their implicit story is at the centre of the interview, so as few questions as possible should be raised. The narrative approach put interviewer and interviewee in a dialogue; which implies that the interviewer is a good listener giving room to the interviewee to develop his/her story in the best circumstances. S/he does not prompt, just facilitates the dialogue to get into a conversational mode (Laenen 2007 p.60). For this type of interview patience is important; hence time is not restricted.

Before the actual captation of the story, the artists made a preparatory visit, in order to learn to know the interviewee so that when registering the story the participants were already relatively at ease. Though some of the actual interviews still took 4 hours, since some interviewees needed more time than others to get to their story. They often had to overcome the fact that an audio recorder was on the table. Once the interviewees forgot the recorder, unexpected stories came out. It offered the interviewers new insights on the community and its cultural heritage. Such an example is the interview with Ahmed, who gave the interviewers insight in the life of the first generation of migrant miners. A pitfall here was that certain stories became too personal, too intense, so that one had to be careful with what to use in the final presentation and what not.

While telling their story the photographer captured the interviewee on his/her couch, which resulted in spontaneous portraits.

The selection of both fragments of the recordings as well as photographs to be used in the project was done with the interviewees. Not only because of the delicacy of the stories told, but also to give the participants ownership in the way the stories were compiled.

Once the material was gathered, the artists involved play writer Stefan Perceval into the project. He gave Jefke Tuf a voice. As the binding image of the project; she got the honours to introduce the different interviewees. Christine Verheyden, a young and local actress, proved to be excellent to bring Jefke's voice to live.

### **Disseminating the stories**

With the binding texts, the interviews, the pictures, some video footage taken in the cités, and the topographical as well as the socio-historical information of Winterslag available, the artists developed a storytelling path with different layers. As mentioned in the introduction the material gathered to tell the stories needed to be available in an online and offline format, in order to reach an as wide audience as possible. Since not all participants consult online tools a mere digital way of giving the stories back tot the community would put part of them in the dark. Therefore a mix of

media was used to disseminate the stories. Hence Jefke Tuf turned into a transmedia project (<http://www.jefketuf.be>). If interpreting transmedia in a correct sense one has to admit that Jefke Tuf is not a pur sang transmedia project, since there is a little overlap between the content of the media used. This has been done deliberately because the artists wanted to give the opportunity to those not consulting the online channels to grasp the essence of the project and enjoy the content provided in a proper way. Though this is only a minor deviance to the transmedia spirit of the project. Thanks to the rich amount of material it was possible to differ the content in selection and format for each medium used. Each media layer adds to the other and the combination of the different layers gives a more holistic view on the lives behind the doors across the cités of Winterslag.



illustration 4: screenshot online documentary

So there is the non-linear online documentary (<http://www.jefketuf.be/webdoc/>) giving credit to 12 of the interviews (see illustration 4). The viewer can go through the documentary as s/he pleases; there is no directed way to enjoy this web documentary. Nowadays there are quite a lot of online storytelling platforms available to create such a webdocumentary. The artists decided to work with Klynt. This editing and publishing platform offers the possibility to work with the filed data in different ways: by theme, by own decided pathway and by topography.

Next to the online documentary, there is an alternative way to discover the Vennestraat and the cités of Winterslag through an audio guided tour. A printed map documented with a set of mp3 files downloadable from the website, takes the walker along the houses where stories have been captured. Thus they literally get the story behind the door they are looking at, and grasps part of present and past of the community, as well as of the different cultural backgrounds in the cités. The content of the walk differs from the content provided in the web documentary. So when one has finished the walk one can learn more about Winterslag while watching the documentary. Mark that this is probably the first walk to cross the railway and thus leave the first cité. Most projects in Winterslag concentrate around the mine site and the first cité, although the two other cités housed most of the miners back then. Hopefully this tour gains its place between the different walks currently available in Winterslag, since it pins down part of a sociocultural heritage that cannot be traced in another way.

Furthermore 7 of the stories and binding texts are edited in such a way that the local community radio GRK can broadcast them in a series of 7 portraits.

For those who still prefer a printed book. A publication with the photo portraits and a little text will be available. A CD with audio files is added in order to offer the stories behind the pictures. Again here the artists used the available material in a different way to turn it into a tactile audiobook that can be enjoyed in combination with the other media layers or a part.

And last but not least. The portraits of all participants will be exhibited for a month at an eatery, Gepetto, in the Vennestraat. Here two participants will be more present with a broader selection of pictures than the others since their story was not part of the other media layers yet. One of them is the lovely lady Fatima Assekour. She arrived in Winterslag with her husband 40 years ago and started to work, not in mine but at the FORD factory in Genk. After that month each participant can collect his/her portrait from the eatery.

To launch the results of the project, the artists were sensitive to the voluntarism of the community to help out. Thus it will be a moment for, by and with the residents of Winterslag.

### **Impact on the community**

What the real impact of the project is, can only be measured some time after the launch of the project, but for now one may say that the social aspect of this project proved to be the thriving force behind it. There is not enough time, space, and possibility in current society to tell your story or say what puzzles/bothers/occupies you in daily life. People such as the community development manager and the social worker in the streets are very important in the social fabric of the community. People need to be listened to in order to keep 'living together' peacefully. This project offered a little extra time and space. The artists experienced the need for the participants to do so. Thus a lot of the material gathered through the interviews could not be used because it was too personal.

The mapping process almost became an excuse and a side effect of what really was engaged through *Jefke Tuf*; that is not only the strong relations build between the initiating artists and the community, but also the relations shaped between the residents participating in the project.

Therefore it has been proved important to take time for 'after care'. The stories told are very personal. So it is important to use them with respect. The participants are also very passionate about the place they live. The stories deducted from the interviews are honest and personal, so it is important to use them with respect en to give them the attention they deserve. Not only through the documentary, the walk, the broadcasts, the exhibition, but also through a festive launch moment. In such a way one can give something back to the community on the short and the long term.

Thus keeping into account that the project is important for the residents of the community proved to be important. When working in a partnership one is used to ask "what's in it for me?" The same goes for projects demanding engagement of the community. It has to be their project and they need to have the feeling that they indeed get something in return.

### **Conclusion**

The artists could not have foreseen from the start what the results of the project would be. They started with a vague idea and developed this idea 'en cours de route' with the residents and stakeholders of the community. The strength of this project is the way the community got involved

from the start. The more the project evolved the more the feeling of ownership by the participants grew. They are now huge ambassadors of the project. Stefan and Boumediene saw themselves just as the facilitator in the project. Throughout *Jefke Tuf* all credits were and are for the residents of Winterslag and the participants of the project, since their ownership is crucial. It is their project, not the one of the artists.

Therefore a great deal of passion and voluntarism is needed from the artists to make this work. Thanks to their openness and flexibility towards the community they achieved to gain trust and support from within the community.

To reach this kind of trust, the artists needed time. A sociocultural community project such as *Jefke Tuf* demands it, since engaging the community does not come overnight. One can plan beforehand, but when running the project one realises that one always has to be resilient with the time schedule. As shown the first weeks the project did not go forward, all time was used to get related with residents and participants.

From beginning to end it takes at least 6 months. This project has taken longer because the artists did not have the time to work on it 6 months in a row. On way or another it has not been so bad to launch the final results a year after the project started. It is possibly deeper rooted now, although that is difficult to prove at present.

Due to the fact peoples' inner stories have been captured, the social dimension of the project proved more important than the mapping of these stories. For the participant it was an opportunity to tell what thrives them. As such respect and care of the used material was crucial.

So as an artist in this kind of projects it is important to think about the day after. You have to know what happens next and not just leave.

A real closing event is necessary, and the involvement of the residents and participants in this event, so that again there is a feeling of ownership. In the end it became their project. The artists just translated it in a specific format to make it known to a wider audience.

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Ann has a master Arts and Theatre Science in Leuven and has reached the PhD level in 2007 at the University of Leeds – School of Education on audience policy within cultural institutions: *Why Opera Education – Five case studies of views in a European context* was the title of her thesis. She worked as a freelance consultant in Arts Communication/Management & Audience Development Projects. In the last eight years the link between Arts Marketing/Education and the use of new technologies in the dialogue between socio-cultural institutions and their audiences have become more central within her work. From 2009 onwards she combined her freelance work with the assignment as co-ordinator of the programme communication & Media Design at the Media & Design Academy in Genk. October 2010 she became the Head of this institution. Two years later she was appointed as



Dean of the Faculty of the Arts at LUCA School of Arts / KU Leuven. Her research focus is still on arts education and new technologies. As from October she will be visiting professor at the Department of Digital Arts of the University of Malta.



### **Stefan Kolgen**

Stefan was coordinator of StoryLab at C.H.I.P.S.vzw and guest lecturer at the Media, Arts & Design Faculty (Genk). He studied 'image/sound/editing' at RICTS in Brussels. He is active in the field of new media and Internet since 1993. Testing and introducing new technologies and communication tools within the work of (socio)cultural institutions is at the forefront of his work, as well as implementing them in projects involving as many people as possible in a creative process: eg. citychromosomes, droom de stad, BoekenCast.be. Since 2008 he developed and coordinated one of the first officially recognised Flemish Youth Press Agency – StampMedia. From 2013 onwards he handed over the coordinatorship of the agency and within C.H.I.P.S.vzw he concentrates himself again on new media and interaction; this time within the field of storytelling. He recently ran a transmedia project in Winterslag with and for the community. (see: [storylab.be](http://storylab.be))

