

Hidden Spirits

The aim of Hidden Spirits is to give a voice to and connect small villages (both within and beyond Europe) that usually remain unknown and isolated. The project has proved to be a source of inspiration leading to the exploration of many different ideas. The first project put remote communities into direct communication with the world by placing personal and collective memories on the web. In the setting of a small Bulgarian village, it brought together a multidisciplinary, international team with expertise in the areas of identity, memory and digital culture

Significant features

Hidden Spirits combines old stories with innovative storytelling methodologies. It is a project in which participants can exchange roles and be simultaneously witnesses and players; in which creativity is challenged by the ability to listen and understand. **Hidden Spirit's** driving force is the belief that focusing on forgotten personal stories that are waiting to be retold can form the basis for a new understanding of diversity.

Some of the places...

Bela Rechka is a small village in north-west Bulgaria with a population of less than a hundred people whose average age is between 70 and 75. Most of them live alone, the younger generations having moved to the cities or abroad.

Mbrestan, on the hillsides of southern Albania (Barat region), is another example of a remote place whose richness awaits fresh discovery. The nearest centre is roughly 10 km away. 180 or so families live in Mbrestan, spread within the high valley.

How it all started

The Bela Rechka initiative was in my head for many years. After the death of my grandmother and my mother - both born in the village of Bela Rechka - the idea became more and more powerful. Actually, it was at the beginning more a feeling, not an idea - I wanted to express somehow my thankfulness, my deep gratitude (Diana Ivanova).

The first **joint action**, the **Bela Rechka pilot**, resulted from a meeting between **Stanislav Miler**, **Diana Ivanova** and **Paul van Zoggel** in 2003. Other professionals joined them, making it an interdisciplinary experience that merged communication, new media, social science, psychology, anthropology, and economics.

In **Bela Rechka**, participants had their own specific motivations for involvement, from testing specific software to rediscovering personal roots.

In the case of **Diana Ivanova**, this caused her to decide to move back to Bulgaria and try to re-establish a connection with these places. Through personal memories she wanted to begin exploring some possible solutions to what she considered the threefold negativity - the historical and territorial darkness of the Balkans, *'bulgarska*

rabota', and the tendency to produce work that was unfinished or badly done - which was weighing down Bulgaria and creating a gulf between expectations and reality.

It was only on the way home from the first pilot that a genuinely shared vision began to emerge among the participants. ***That was when they realised that they could combine their aims and go forward in the same direction.***

Put a researcher, writer and designer in a box, shake well and publish the outcome (Paul van Zoggel).

Learning

To have a good idea is not always enough. With the Bela Rechka project in mind, I applied for a summer school in cultural management in Salzburg: I realised I needed to look differently at projects since I was mainly working as a journalist (Diana Ivanova).

Project description

HOW WE WORK

A dozen professionals from different cultural, social, professional and national backgrounds meet and spend two weeks in the chosen village, where they investigate, exchange and create along with the local community.

The stay in the village can be a relaxed, almost intimate experience. Contact with the locals - who generously share food and lodgings while following the work of the crew - extends beyond the collecting of stories.

The members of the team share their professional and human know-how, skills, and technical equipment, and use art, storytelling and interactive narratives to collect interviews, sounds, and images.

Presenting the results to the local community can have a strong impact: people see themselves and hear from each other as never before. The element of international participation can also have an uplifting effect on the village.

A key goal of **Hidden Spirits** is the publication and dissemination of results to a wide audience. This would include many traditional media platforms (e.g. the **Bela Rechka book**: The book is bilingual - in Bulgarian and English - and currently available in three European countries - Germany, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic.) as well as innovative ones, such as interactive online and off-line documentary that uses the *D.A.D.A. e-publishing system*

<http://www.dadadoc.com/>

or the *.Korsakowtool*

<http://www.labforculture.org/en>

LEARNING

A **family connection** in the particular location is helpful in breaking down potential communication barriers with locals. (Participants of the pilot stayed at Diana Ivanova's grandparents' house, while Mbrestan is the family village of an Albanian participant.)

Technology can have an **intimidating** effect. It is better to avoid using large cameras and technical teams, as these can make local people feel uncomfortable. The fact that so many of the villagers are elderly means that it is often difficult for them to use a camera themselves.

EXPERIENCES, NOT EXPECTATIONS

The first outcome of Hidden Spirits was the Bela Rechka pilot, but since then the project has moved in new directions.

New media tools play a significant role in the project. Digital narrative seems capable of transforming anyone into a potential author and co-creator of a '*common*' identity, giving new meaning to old memories.

This is the case with the current project of **Stanislav Miler** and **mamapapa**. They are working on an oral history project, collecting stories about socialism and publishing them in books, on the web and on DVD, and creating multimedia installations and performances.
<http://mamapapa.cz/en/>

Further developing the multimedia experience, **Paul van Zoggel** is working on a (Workshop) Game Package called '*My Town Project*'. The idea is to combine a classical board game with the Internet to create a storytelling place-project.

Bela Rechka has for a second year hosted the memories festival, **Goatmilk Festival**.

<http://novakultura.org/goat-milk/en/>

The first edition, a 3-day event, attracted 130 creative people from 10 European countries and saw the active participation of the local community. *In Bela Rechka locals have begun developing their own projects as a result of the Goatmilk initiative.* For example, the publisher of the **Bela Rechka** book was happy to edit it because he too came from the village; for him it was a way of reconnecting with his birthplace.

The **Hidden Spirits** format is being adapted for a second event in the Albanian village of **Mbrestan**, although the project is currently on hold due to lack of funding. In this instance, **Hidden Spirits** is working on just one part of a broader project called '*Discover the Albanian countryside*'.
<http://www.novakultura.org/proekti2005-e.html>

LEARNING

Bela Rechka helped the core team to meet on a regular basis, develop something real, and discuss further possibilities according to experiences and not expectations.

However, cooperation can be hindered by the fact that all these people live in different environments and countries and have their own expectations.

DREAMS AND HOPES

There is a wide gap between the three dimensions of communication, between the word, the science and the art. We believe an active dialogue between these three dimensions is the basis of reaching the full potential of interactive online media channels, and reaching a wide audience. (Hidden Spirits: the vision)

The goal is to link people and activities that rarely mix and to provoke new insights and questions. In particular, **Hidden Spirits** seeks to attract **younger generations** to the issue of perception, memory, and representation and to promote new ways of understanding the past and the local (spiritual) heritage as a source of richness. Overall, the aim is to **stimulate reflection on diversity as an answer to local conditions.**

Consequently, the expectations of the project relate to different levels.

At local level, the aim is to:

- **Connect village stories** and lay the basis for the creation of an online library, video and audio archive, research, and residency for artists, journalists, researchers and students.
- **Inspire village people** to create their own 'hidden spirit' content or identity by increasing local community involvement, particularly of young people.
- **Promote digital media and Internet know-how** as an easy, low-cost communication tool. A medium-term aim is for the format and developed software to become **accessible platforms** which will allow designers, journalists and social researchers to develop similar projects without having to depend on the organisation behind it or having to pay for the system.

At a more general and long-term level, Hidden Spirits expects to have some positive impact on people's mentality: the wish is that some citizens would stop seeing their identity as a unyielding essence and start thinking on how they can change their life, also by using their community heritage.

FUNDING AND SUPPORT SYSTEM

A woman called me this year - her daughter is the publisher of a magazine called 'Garden' - she is also from Bela Rechka. She always wanted to do something about the place and now learned about the project and wanted to help. She said: 'There were not enough flowers last year.' So she planted some flowers and gave us flowers and now will develop more gardening in the village. (Diana Ivanova)

Different solutions and strategies are being implemented, reflecting the different phases of development.

The **Bela Rechka pilot** was entirely funded by the organisers themselves (e.g. they lived in the empty house of Diana's relatives). **They decided to invest their own funds in order to see - to understand and test - how the initial idea worked.** Clearly, such a solution was only possible because of the minor financial effort required - about 100 euros each for a 10-day stay. And this did not always work out.

For the second experience, in Albania, the European Cultural Foundation awarded a preliminary travel grant for the initial exploration. The team also applied for funding to the Media Development Strategy of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. However, the application was recently rejected on the grounds that it did not fully meet the strategy's current priorities.

<http://cms.ifa.de/en/info/nachrichten-presseschau/ifahome/>

LEARNING

At the beginning I thought that, once the project was well defined, obtaining a grant would not be particularly difficult. This was a mistake. It was a mistake to look for funding at an international level, before exploring the local one.

For the initial Goatmilk festival, we first applied for grants to the ECF, but didn't get any. The answer came late and we desperately started to look for funding. We met the mayor of the Varshetz municipality to tell him what we were planning to do. We didn't ask for money because it was just two months before the festival. But he asked us - 'Why don't you ask money from me? Ask and I will give it to you!' So he gave a small amount of 2000 leva (1000 euro). We received small donations from people, ourselves gave small donations, while several people helped us for free. Never overlook all local possibilities! There are more possibilities than one could ever imagine .

It is better to work with small independent partners that to have a big donor.

For the second Goatmilk festival, we started early on to make a list of all possible partners and to contact them. By December we knew almost everything. The event was founded by different partners, e.g. the Varshetz municipality, the Goethe Institute in Sofia, the Czech Cultural Centre, the Red House for Culture and Debate, Czech Airlines, the Soros Centre for Cultural policies. Goethe, the Czech Centre and the Swiss Foreign Department supported the travel of participants from their countries. (Diana Ivanova)

We have found out that for most of our partners it is not possible to provide the 5% of the 100,000 Euro necessary to apply for a Culture2000 grant (Stanislav Miler).

WHO WE ARE

Poland, the Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic. The team consists of: Massimo Catalfo, Patrick McEntaggart, Diana Ivanova, Detelin Vulkov, Mariana Asenova, Milena Yankova, Agnieszka Cwielag, Marzena Ryba, Ireneusz Trypkevic, Stanislav Miler, and Paul van Zoggel.

New Culture Foundation: The Foundation, headed by Diana Ivanova, aims to put the issue of Bulgarian identity into a multicultural perspective and make it part of the global debate about changing and preserving identities. The Bela Rechka project was the first project of the Foundation and part of the LOVEMATIC (love+automatic) project that aims to collect and put online memories of small villages and towns in Bulgaria.

Noema Meeting Cultures

Paul van Zoggel is a media artist and cultural project developer who focuses on bringing stories and products from Eastern Europe (especially Romania) to the West, in particular through the creation of a digital environment.

E80Films

E80 is a road connecting East and West. It begins in Turkey, passes through Bulgaria, and ends in Portugal. But for the media production company it is not only a real road but a mental map. The company focuses on projects that support a change in the way of thinking, by applying new technologies to different domains.

Trimedia (Stanislav Miler)

The company has more than five years' experience in Internet and multimedia design, video, film and TV production and digital post-production.

SONIDO studio (Massimo Catalfo, Patrick McEntaggart, Stanislav Miler) This multimedia agency is dedicated to cultural heritage, interactive installations and digital art, with the aim of creating multimedia works. It has developed the D.A.D.A. system.

mamapapa

An independent, non-profit organisation founded and operated by artists for artists working in performing and live arts, in particular those dealing with issues related to village and urban cultures.

Regio-Berater

Michael Heusinger's company specialises in regional economic, social, and environmental development. It has a special interest in Albania, particularly tourism development in the Berat region.

THANKS TO

Massimo Catalfo, Diana Ivanova, Paul van Zoggel, Stanislav Miler, Patrick McEntaggart, Michael Heusinger

This information was retrieved via the web and through face-to-face, email, and phone contacts with many of the people involved in the project.

Bela Rechka

<http://www.novakultura.org/belarechka-e.html>

DADA

<http://www.dadadoc.com/>

Goatmilk Festival

<http://www.goatmilk-fest.org/>

E80Films

<http://www.e80.biz/en/default.htm>

Trimedia

<http://www.trimedia.cz/>

New Culture Foundation

<http://www.novakultura.org/>

Noema Meeting Cultures

<http://www.noema.nl/>

SONIDO studio

<http://www.sonidostudio.net/>

mamapapa

<http://mamapapa.cz/web/en/>

Creative Commons

<http://creativecommons.org/>

LabforCulture is a partner initiative of the European Cultural Foundation.

LabforCulture is grateful for the support provided by its funders.

Copyright and Database Right 2005-2006, European Cultural Foundation,
Amsterdam | Terms of use.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License.

<http://www.labforculture.org/en>