

The Power of Stories in Leisure

Interview with Professor of Storytelling Moniek Hover

When you say 'storytelling' at Breda University of Applied Sciences (formerly NHTV), you immediately think of Moniek Hover. She obtained her PhD on the subject in 2013 with a case study of the Efteling (major Dutch theme park) in relation to fairytales. Earlier exploratory research into experience instruments showed that storytelling stood head and shoulders above instruments such as theming or stimulating the senses. 'Storytelling turned out to be a very powerful tool in the sense that people could often remember stories well, that they were touched by the stories and could retell them,' says Moniek. A 'crown jewel' is the Crossroads project on which she has been working since 2015. Stories of ordinary people from the Second World War are central here. In 2019/2020 these stories played the leading role in Brabant Remembers, commemorating 75 years of liberation.

What is the role of storytelling in our sector?

'Storytelling can be the core of your tourism product, but it can also be used in marketing to attract visitors, for instance. The clearest example is the Efteling. Stories are at the heart of the product here. You are immersed in a story. But storytelling also plays a role in how people interpret their own leisure experiences (for themselves). You place experiences in your episodic memory and you retell these stories to yourself or to others. Stories of suppliers and stories of visitors are actually two sides of the same coin.'

Does storytelling deepen the experience?

'With storytelling, you charge what you communicate symbolically and emotionally. As a storyteller you provide meaning with your story, and the person who receives the story extracts a meaning from it. Sometimes this is the same meaning, but very often also slightly different, depending on the frame of reference and the associations of that person. Storytelling creates room for interpretation. That is what makes it such a powerful tool.'

I wrote down the word 'campfire' here in my interview notes. Are stories so embedded in our genes and do they date from the time when we told stories to each other around the campfire?

'There are people who say that our ability to tell stories sets us apart from other mammals. In fact, the campfire story principle is still valid with all the new media. A storyteller around the campfire tells a story very much with a scope of entertainment. Storytellers want to entertain the audience sitting there. This can be done with a funny or exciting story, but also with a very sad story. Then you are more likely talking about involvement, you want someone to be carried away by the story.'

'Someone responds and the storyteller takes it one step further'

What happens then is that storytellers will always adapt their story a bit to the audience sitting there. Making it a little less scary when there are small children; making it a bit more scary when people are already on the edge of their seats. Or you respond to reactions you receive. What you see happening on social media these days follows the same principle. Someone responds and the storyteller takes it one step further. The principle of the storyteller around the campfire still applies.'

Why do stories work so well?

'A very important function of a story is that people can use their own imagination. Everyone knows the difference between reading a story in a book where you can create your own images, and a film adaptation. Sometimes the film is not at all as you had imagined, but every so often the film gives so much extra detail that that world becomes even richer than you envisioned in your own imagination. What is also important is the suspension of disbelief. Within your mind you willingly overlook that it's just not all real, that you 'put this in the parking lot' so to speak, in order to let yourself get completely carried away by the story. People just like that.'

Should a story always be told in words?

'I make a distinction between explicit and implicit storytelling, but very often it is a mix of both. With explicit storytelling you use words. This can be done orally via a live narrator, via audio or written text. Implicit storytelling is a story you tell through

images. Images, objects, scenes, symbols can evoke a story for you. A good example of implicit storytelling is the Droomvlucht ride of the Efteling. You do not just float through a beautiful natural flowery landscape, there are also characters in it. Years ago, students asked visitors to create their own story to go with this ride. As it turned out, people mainly saw the battle between the trolls and the fairies. People use the characters from the show to make a story.'

What are the ingredients of a good story?

'A lot of research has been done into story structures which resulted in various models. The model that I often use for the projects we do consists of 5 steps. The same steps are also recognisable in the story of Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, or something similar. The 5 steps that you often see:

1. It starts with a set-up, the 'hero' is introduced.
2. Then there is a motoric moment. A problem or question occurs and the hero must act.
3. Then there are a number of turning points that lead to a climax.
4. The climax is an absolute high in a positive story, or an absolute low in a tragedy.
5. Then with the resolution comes an insight, an end feeling, or a moral.

Does a story have to be true?

'No, but a story must be truthful. It must somehow be about real, recognisable emotions of people. Harry Potter is a fantasy story, everyone knows that. Witches, wizards and trolls don't really exist. And yet, those characters are set up and they develop in such a way that you can fully identify with them. Ultimately, it is about friendship, trust, disappointment and jealousy, and thus about human emotions recognisable to everyone.'

Should a story always take place in one location?

'What we often do is use stories to make connections between locations. Together you are stronger and it is more powerful as a region or province to tell coherent stories from one narrative concept. Visitors experience a story at one location, and therefore become interested in visiting other locations as well to experience even more stories.'



Moniek Hover: 'Storytelling can be the core of your tourism'

Why is storytelling popular?

'I think the popularity of storytelling goes hand in hand with the emotionalisation of society. In politics, the news, in television programmes, it is very much about stories and about characters. Just look at the way storytelling comes into play during the COVID pandemic... It sames ages ago but can you remember the example of the boys who got stuck in the cave in Thailand in 2018?

'Goes hand in hand with the emotionalisation of society'

At the same time, much bigger disasters were happening in other places, but this was the story that everyone sympathised with. Because it was so easy to identify with. Where it happened, the nationality of the boys - that did not matter. Anyone anywhere in the world can relate to boys who play in a football team. That is something that is very close to us.'

Do stories connect us?

'Stories connect people. Through identification you can empathise with the main character of the story. Let us go back to the football team in the Thai cave. First the trainer was the fool who had put the boys in danger. Later he became a hero of some kind because he gave his food supply to the boys and taught the boys how to meditate to relieve stress

and tension. He became a true hero when he insisted on being the last to be taken out of the cave. Not surprisingly, film producers were immediately interested in making a film out of the story which was released in 2019.'

Nowadays everything has to be short, shorter, shortest. Does that also apply to stories?

'On the one hand, you see that stories have to be ultra-short. A minute and a half for a cat video on social media is considered long. On the other hand, stories can be longer and more complicated. You can see that with Netflix and HBO which have very long and complicated series that people binge-watch, getting carried away in all the twists and turns of the story'.

Do you still see trends and developments in storytelling?

'Crossmedia storytelling is becoming more popular. This involves unfolding the story in different variants on different channels. Transmedia storytelling is also often mentioned as a trend. Here you need different channels to be able to experience the complete story.'

Do stories that reach us through all kinds of media herald the end of travelling?

'Fortunately for our industry, people have an indestructible need to travel to authentic physical places. Although with the corona crisis, virtual online ways to explore places have soared, , people still do long to go places to experience them with all their senses and to make their own stories. Two years ago, I was in Dubrovnik where important parts of the fantasy series Game of Thrones were filmed. Game of Thrones tours and shops with all kinds of merchandise can be found there. In Dubrovnik, people can switch between authentic locations and a fantasy world. Although you can experience everything virtually these days, people still want to go to the actual place. .''

How do you turn a historical fact into a good story?

'See if you can gain insight into the motives and emotions of people from that time. Are there any letters or people who knew people from that time? That's how we work at Crossroads. In the stories of the *Zuiderwaterlinie*, this was sometimes not possible because some episodes took place



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Pictures

On Saturday 22 September 2018, Brabant Remembers launched a unique augmented reality app featuring more than 30 (!) actors. Ten stories take place in the location from that time, before your eyes. This app connects the stories and locations of Brabant Remembers. Never before has such an extensive and province-wide AR production been developed about the Second World War. The images in this article are screenshots from the Brabant Remembers app.

centuries ago. Then, if you frame it well, you can work with a historical sidekick. On the one hand you tell the historical narrative, but you tell it from the perspective of, for example, a cabin boy of whom you do not know whether he really existed. But what could he have experienced? As an example you can think of the popular Dutch children's book *Kruistocht in spijkerbroek*. A boy from the present who, via a time machine, ends up in the children's crusade.

What exactly is Crossroads?

'Crossroads is a layered, narrative concept around turning points in the history of the Second World War. It is also about geographic intersections, where armies fought with each other, about historical turning points or turning points in human lives. We have mainly focused on the human stories. People whose lives were radically changed by the Second World War.'

How did you select the stories for Crossroads?

'An important criterion was that people should be able to visit the location in Brabant where the turning points took place. We had to drop many of the 700 stories, often very moving ones, because the important turning points took place in, for example, other provinces, Germany, Russia or Indonesia. Moreover, you cannot tell the same or a similar story in every place. That means that at large war museums such as Overloon or at Camp Vught, where many different people were locked up and terrible tragedies played out, we had to ask

ourselves which story we wanted to put in the 'shop window'.

In that project, I came up with the metaphor of the shopping street. You walk down the shopping street and you see one thing in the shop window that draws your attention. This is the story that should touch everyone, encouraging them to come into the 'store' to see that there is much more to experience. Patrick Timmermans of Brabant Heritage then added that we should have stories in the 'warehouse' too. Stories that are not always directly accessible to the public, but that we do want to keep.' So, fortunately, none of the 700 stories that were collected were thrown away.

'This is the story that should touch everyone and, encouraging them to come into the 'store''

How were the stories retrieved?

'Brabant Heritage and Brabant Remembers organised 15 events in Brabant where people could come and tell their war stories. It was literally grandma behind the walker who came to tell her war story. But local historians, journalists and people from local history circles also know a lot about this topic. In the end, we collected over 700 stories from which, together with Brabant Heritage and the Crossroads Content Council (which consists of six historians and myself), we selected 75 stories



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that represent 75 years of liberation in Brabant. Those choices were very difficult. For example, I was allowed to rewrite the story of George and Ursula Levy about how they escaped the children's transport of Camp Vught. That really kept me awake at night, because when I tell this story I do not tell the story of the 1,296 other children who did not survive this deportation.'

How did you align storytellers and historians?

'We developed a workshop for historians and journalists where we taught them the Crossroads way of storytelling. That was very interesting, because you saw that journalists had a tendency to reveal the whole story in the first paragraph, via the who-what-where-when-why method. But if you want to tell a good story, you will hold back certain things for the climax. And the historians sometimes had a tendency to add a lot of facts and information that made the stories too long and too complicated.'

You also made a brand guide – very much like commercial businesses do. Was that necessary?

'The Crossroads brand guide is a guideline on how to keep the concept we developed pure. We knew that a lot of people would start working with those stories – diluting them before you know it. After all, people interpret things in their own way and find other aspects more important. The brand guide contains the rules that should be adhered to in order to maintain a certain level of uniformity. We have translated the theory of brand development from the commercial world into the world of heritage.'

Why are stories important from a tourism point of view?

'Previous research into memorial locations shows that people who had visited such a 'dark tourism' location were inclined less than average to make a repeat visit, but were willing more than average to recommend it to others. Then we thought: if we now ensure that they take one story from that location that they can retell to others, we will turn these visitors into storytellers who recommend our 'product'.'

What are the learnings for you in this process?

'That you need to guard the brand well and keep the essence clear. People often think that creation should take place in boundless freedom, but often limitation makes for extra creativity. We also

learned that you sometimes need to be strict and stern, otherwise the message will get diluted to next to nothing. We translated the Crossroads storytelling tools into a folder for people who started working with the stories. That worked well.'

'Ensure that they take one story from that location'

What surprised you?

'It was very nice that some of the historians started the project with a lot of scepticism, but were gradually able to clearly identify what was potentially a Crossroads story and what was not so suited a Crossroads story. This does not mean, by the way, that the latter is not a valuable story. It should certainly be preserved and cherished, just not as a Crossroads story.'

Another learning?

'A valuable moment was that we used lessons from fiction and applied them to non-fiction. It was very nice to see that this was possible.'

What was different from fiction?

'A very big question that has stayed with me is the rule of, for example, storytelling guru Robert McKee or Pixar that your character may get into trouble by chance, but that it should never be a coincidence that gets your character out of trouble. This is because solving something by chance is a 'bad' story. But when I looked at those war stories, it turned out that coincidence was very often involved. By accident a lot of people got into trouble and by coincidence they sometimes did or did not get out of it. Actually, that makes real life more incredible than fiction.'

What is the next step?

'In the CELTH Storysperience Project we are using scientific neuro and biometric research to investigate whether stories made by using storytelling principles, cause more emotions than factual stories. This project is co-funded by CELTH (Centre of Expertise in Leisure, Tourism and Hospitality). With this, we try to demonstrate whether and how storytelling works. We do this for, among others, the Van Gogh Heritage Foundation.'

Someone is reading this story and wants to put it to use. What can you do?

'Storytelling can be used in building very expensive and beautiful attractions around a story. But it can also be very simple. A student of mine once did a research project at the Zuiderzee Museum (an open-air museum devoted to preserving cultural heritage and maritime history). In this museum there was an old hairdresser's shop with a chalkboard just outside the door saying 'will be back in half an hour', as if the hairdresser from the past would somehow magically reappear.'

A combination of implicit and explicit storytelling costs almost nothing, but the experience reports showed that visitors made their own story with that sign. It is about stimulating people's imagination and that is something that young and old will always enjoy. My conclusion is that it can be very grand and compelling, and also very simple."

Dr. Moniek Hover and her storytelling teams recently delivered storytelling projects for Hanzesteden Marketing, Nature Border Park De Groote Heide, Museum Markiezenhof. They currently work on a storytelling project for Van Gogh National Park, and on folktales & legends trails for VisitBrabant.

Want to know more?

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