“Echoes of Nature”: a transmedia project to foster dialogue about the natural capital of Madeira island

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Abstract

This work investigates the transmedia aspects and implications of “Echoes of Nature” (EoN), an interactive platform functioning as a touchpoint for a range of diverse experiences designed to open up dialogues between visitors of the island of Madeira and its rich natural capital, traditions and folklore.

Keywords: Transmedia storytelling and participatory journalism • Design, Analyses and Evaluation of transmedia systems • Interactive digital narrative

1 Introduction

The work presented in this position paper investigates the transmedia aspects and implications of “Echoes of Nature” (EoN), an interactive platform functioning as a touchpoint for a range of diverse experiences designed to open up dialogues between visitors of the island of Madeira and its rich natural capital, traditions and folklore. In order to create opportunities for this dialogue the platform supports two main points of connection. On one hand, it functions as a repository of locally collected video interviews highlighting many aspects of Madeiran island’s natural capital and local culture; on the other, it points users to the location-aware fictional story “Fragments of Laura” (FoL). FoL develops as a location-based playable story by engaging its audience in exploring the city of Funchal, (Madeira, Portugal) while learning some of the Island historical and natural facts (see Dionisio et al., 2016). FoL’s storyline is based on the history and natural capital of the island, and it is narrated through the adventures of a local heroine, Laura, a proto pharmacist in the early 1800s (see Dionisio et al., 2016). The focus on a fictional character allows for the interweaving of varied facts (cultural, historical and scientific) that would be difficult to incorporate if not for the liberty that fictional writing affords. Through our transmedia experience, visitors to Madeira will embark on a quest following a fantomatic ancient herbarium and its author, Laura (see fig.1).
Moreover, the web-based platform “Echoes of Nature”, was designed to complement FoL experience by connecting the overall audience of the mobile story app - Portuguese and foreign visitors - with local scientists, traditions, and day-to-day events. For the “Echoes of Nature” participatory platform, we have interviewed 18 local sources collecting around 20 hours of video, so far. To tightly link the web-based platform with the mobile fiction, in a transmedia fashion, we highlighted seven main themes out of the fictional narrative. The interviewees were chosen according to their expertise and local knowledge on those themes. The interviews’ content is related to medicinal plants and folk remedies drawn from the Laurisilva ecosystem, as well as the history of Madeira as a living lab, the history of traditional artworks and crafting of Madeira. The interviews are then displayed in the web platform as short video fragments as well as shorter teasers to appear at the end of each fictional episode on the Mobile Story application¹.

The originality of the project resides on the exploratory approach of intersecting several transmedia aspects, from a locative playable fictional story to the web-based journalistic style science interviews. The overall goal is to foster awareness and environmental preservation on a small island as well as generating public participation and dialogue on the scientific facts and curiosity of the local natural capital. The transmedia experience should invite the audience to go deeper into these topics.

Finally, “Echoes of Nature” is part of an ongoing research work, started 2 years ago under the Future Fabulators Media and Culture EU funded project, and continuing under Beanstalk regional project centered around the fields of tourism and marketing sponsored by MADEIRA 14-20 FEDER, with the collaboration of the Madeira Promotion Bureau (AP Madeira).

¹ A prototype of the webpage can be found here: http://echoes.Tigerwhale.com
2 On the narrative structure and authoring aspects of the work

The work has followed a rather experimental development process, from story conception, to location aware adaptation of the narrative, transmedia additions (journalistic style interviews with local scientists and characters) and, finally, web participatory elements.

Initially, we conceived and designed the fictional story with an Aristotelian dramatic arc, where a protagonist undergoes a series of adventures to culminating in a significant event that should set the audience off for their final quest of call for action. The fictional narrative was then adapted to work as a location aware multimedia story where the audience is guided through the exploration of the physical streets of the city of Funchal in order to unravel the plot of the narrative while gaining knowledge about the history and the natural capital of the island.

Seven touchpoints between the story and the audience have been designed with attention to the delivery of information about the island natural capital, its history, progression of the plot and exploration of the physical settings. At the end of each plot point, several interviews fragments are proposed to the public in order to put the audience in touch with real events and facts about the island, and potentially foster dialogue between tourists and locals. The web platform that host all the interviews material is still a work in progress.

Overall, this work is situated between Immersive Entertainment and what Robert Pratten (2015) names Transmedia for Change (T4C). T4C is a way of engaging audi-
ences aiming at social change through transmedia storytelling, which in turn is a technique of providing a story experience across multiple platforms and formats. Drawing on principles of community journalism (Reader & Hatcher, 2011), our ultimate purpose is to make EoN participatory by encouraging users to collaborate with related content, and inviting them to send questions, comments, or any other kinds of user-generated content (such as photos or videos) to augment the current repository of scientific and traditional knowledge.

Ultimately, we are interested in exploring the intersections between community journalism and sense of place through a user experience test that will allow us to analyze how a participatory transmedia project can help us instill a better sense of place in both tourists and locals. We argue that dialogue is fundamental to achieve awareness and respect regarding Madeiran natural capital. Finally, we believe our efforts are moving towards improving the quality of tourism on the island by jointly highlighting cultural with natural heritage to a wide range of audiences.

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3 References