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Cross-sector and cross-discipline project planning for serious interactive digital narratives

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Abstract. This tutorial will provide participants with an overview of a theory-based project planning process, namely a “seven-phase framework” for creating nonfiction edutainment experiences from the ground up. The types of “serious digital stories” can take various formats (e.g., serious games, mobile apps, interactive web exhibitions/documentaries, AR/VR) depending on the interests and needs of the project developers. The target audience that would most benefit from this tutorial would be collaboration teams from institutions (e.g., museum, NGO, news reporters), research groups, creative industries, and (preferably) one member from each group. By the end of this tutorial a team of collaborators could develop a drafted project proposal for future academic funding application or a series of “next steps” for carrying out an research and development project.

Keywords: non-fiction · edutainment · project planning.

1 Background on the Theoretical Approach

As more participatory narratives are being developed by scholars, creative industries, and members of the public and they are increasingly using digital media, it raises the challenge of authorial control of the resulting emergent narrative(s). This challenge to authorial control has been termed the “narrative paradox” by Aylett in 1999 [1] who introduced the difficulty of “retaining the original narrative” because the audience is actively involved, such as in the case of virtual environments where the audience becomes a “user,” “interactor” or even a “co-producer” of the narrative. The level of control is two-fold in that the first question for the narrative creator is how much of the narrative can be relaxed, or opened-up to change, and secondly how much the “user” can participate in the narrative [1]. The level of control on either side, namely the authorial or public (i.e., “user” in digital media) is a key aspect of how successful the resulting product is in terms of whether the desired narrative is actually communicated. When interactive narratives are co-produced by experts across sectors and the public, there needs to be a larger underlying theme, communication goal, and rationale for constructing the project. Strong authorial control on behalf of experts has been the most common approach to date because they can solicit input from

the public rather than completely putting the narrative in their hands, but new opportunities lie in project planning and cross-sector collaboration.

As an example, public history and cultural heritage projects in recent years have begun sharing authority with members of the public who are contributing to narrative production in a variety of ways. The most-frequently seen methods of public participation in these types of projects to date are crowdsourcing oral histories, archives, and community heritage information [2]; civic labour in the contribution of helping “read” historical documents or categorise archives; user-testing and/or civic engagement and interaction through online forums and social media responses to interactive narratives; and bottom-up and collaborative co-authorship in transmedia narratives [3]. These participatory co-constructive approaches will be discussed and some popular themes for digital interactive narratives development such as, the protection/preservation of cultural heritage sites; environmental storytelling (e.g., conscious consumerism, sustainable tourism); and transmedia journalism to educate the public about detecting “fake news” and/or sensational articles by developing their digital literacies.

2 Description of Tutorial Content

The first 30-minutes will be an introduction to the seven-phase development framework [4]. This framework includes a “ludonarrative toolkit” and evaluation model, which will be useful for participants while they think about their own projects. This will be followed by a presentation of a few examples of “serious interactive digital narratives” on non-fiction topics to inspire creativity amongst participants. For example, participatory methods will be contextualised within examples of digital humanities projects, virtual museum exhibitions, mobile applications, and interactive web documentaries.

Participants will then be broken up into small groups or pairs to work with their colleagues (if present) or they will be paired up to achieve (where possible) a cross-sector and cross-disciplinary mixture of backgrounds. Participants will work for 1.5 hours to outline (or visually map out) the seven phases of their project idea. Note: participants can develop a brand new idea or work on mapping an existing idea/project into the respective phases.

After the ‘hands-on’ working session, 30 minutes will be allocated for groups to report back on:

- their reflections on the process of collaborative project development
- what type of project and topic they developed, and
- one key challenge they identified in their potential project such as, access to software/digital media, access to funding, narrative structure, difference of opinion across sectors/disciplines, etc.

Then a 30 minute discussion will follow on these identified challenges and participants will, as a large group, brainstorm ideas to include in their individual “action plans” to problem-solve some solutions prior to departing the tutorial.

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