

TRACES OF TIME: IMMERSIVE STORYTELLING FOR THE VISITOR JOURNEY

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This research presents an immersive storytelling project developed at the Archeological Park of Cuma for enhancing the heritage experience, from the pre-visit stage of the visitor journey. The storytelling develops a connection between two Cinematic Virtual Reality experiences, which aim respectively at influencing visit intentions towards the Park in the pre-visit offsite stage and supporting visitors' full access to the site and its information during the onsite visit.

Background

Virtual reality (VR) is gaining momentum as a powerful storytelling medium for engaging cultural heritage visitors, due to its potential to create sense of presence in the virtual environment and suspension of disbelief, a key aspect of narrative engagement (Roussou, 2008). The challenge is to create visitor-centric VR experiences combining accurate representation with engaging narratives to fuel users' emotional involvement, which impacts interest, learning, memorability (Bozzelli *et al.*, 2019; Pagano *et al.*, 2020; Roussou, 2008).

Purpose

From a visitor journey perspective, this research explores the use of VR storytelling to enhance the heritage experience linking the offsite pre-visit stage and the onsite visit stage. It focuses on the Archeological Park of Cuma, where the paths intertwining myths and history provide rich opportunities for VR storytelling.

Methods

The storytelling was created through a human-centred design process involving potential users and an in-depth research in collaboration with the Superintendence of the Archeological Park of Campi Flegrei. It uses Cinematic VR, a 'walk-in movie' experience, in which viewers can freely explore the site they are virtually immersed in wearing a headset, while a narrative with real actors unfolds around them (Seide & Slater, 2020).

Findings

The storytelling project "Traces of time" develops a connection between two 360° VR videos that experiment different narratives in relations to their different purposes, notably: 1) influencing intention to visit the site in the pre-visit offsite stage; and 2) supporting visitors' full access to the site and to its relevant information during the visit. The screenplay refers to the myth of the Sibyl, who as an immortal, in the progression of age becomes pure voice. It recalls the literature and the legends in its different stories through the attribution of its different names. It tells pills of stories and legends related to the acropolis, the cavern, the temples, showing a character with many shades, powerful and feared but in some ways also very fragile and "human".

The first experience is a trailer available on the web that introduces to the site with an involving rhythm and mysterious implications, for engaging the spectator with brief and punctual hints. In the environment of the cavern, the Sibyl appears with her innumerable voices and identities, without ever manifesting herself. Through binaural audio, the voices "revolve" around the user without ever allowing him to identify a unique origin. This interaction between the voice and the viewer is interrupted by the entrance of a woman who looks like a tourist and asks an apparently obvious question: "Are you looking for advice?"



The second immersive experience, available through a mobile application, is presented as the casual meeting with an unknown character that becomes more and more intimate as the viewer is led to get to know better this "source of knowledge". The story starts from the terrace of the Acropolis with the interaction between the spectator and the mysterious woman presented at the end of the trailer. The woman accompanies the viewer in the visit of the site telling many stories, especially for the aspects related to time, a recurring topic in the words of the mysterious character. The experience ends back in the cavern.

References

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