

Location based transmedia storytelling: The travelplot Porto experience design

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Keywords | Location based transmedia storytelling, Tourism.

Objectives | Transmedia storytelling is considered to be “Quickly becoming the new standard for 21st century communication” (Rutledge, 2011) and “How the future will tell stories” (Peters, 2010). Even though transmedia storytelling has been successfully implemented in marketing and entertainment, its impact in tourism remains to be studied. This summary focuses on the design and development of travelplot Porto, a location based transmedia storytelling pilot experience, which results will help to begin to understand what effect these techniques might have and benefits they may bring to the tourism industry.

Methodology | We start by proposing a new term location based transmedia storytelling, which is the art of telling stories based on a specific location through multiple-media platforms with audience participation, where each storyline makes a valuable and distinctive contribution to the story. This definition allows the authors to narrow the research field of general transmedia storytelling and to focus on the impact of transmedia storytelling techniques, which have locations as their principal characteristic.

Data collection

With the objective of understanding the impact of native location based transmedia storytelling projects, a pilot experience entitled travelplot Porto will be carried-out between the 17th of June 2012 and 9th of September 2012. Travelplot Porto will collect rich qualitative and quantitative data – through statistics, questionnaires and focus groups – which will describe tourists’ practices, their needs and behaviors. It will also capture tourists’ behaviors across different platforms and identify the content they create and share as well as measuring how frequently they do so.

Travelplot Porto design

Travelplot Porto is set in Porto, a UNESCO world heritage site. It aims to be a fun and engaging aide to visiting Porto, enabling tourists to experience the beauty of the city through the process of locating a hidden treasure. This quest will take them to explore the history, the monuments and the historic characters of Porto. They will also experience the events, sights, wine and gastronomical delights of Porto through the project partners.

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Travelplot Porto is also a social responsibility project – supporting the project “A place for joãozinho” that seeks to raise funds to build the new children’s hospital in Porto. Partners of the project will donate 1€ of the tourists’ purchases, driven to them through travelplot Porto, to the charitable cause.

Travelplot Porto was freely designed according to Garrett’s five planes - the strategy plane, the scope plane, the structure plane, the skeleton plane and the surface plane - even though these planes were originally applied to building a website and not a location based transmedia storytelling project (Garrett, 2011).

Strategy plane

The objective of travelplot Porto is to create an emotional and engaging experience for tourists visiting Porto that allow them to have a personalized visit, tailored to their tastes and participation.

Travelplot Porto also aims to gather first hand information regarding these questions:

- Can transmedia storytelling transform tourists’ visits into more engaging experiences?
- What is the market for local based transmedia storytelling products?
- How do tourists behave across the different platforms?
- Which media channels are most used and in what ways?
- What content do tourists create and share and how frequently do they do so?
- How willing are tourists to interact with the story?

Our tourists are committing to this location based transmedia storytelling pilot experience primarily because they get to know some of the main sights through an active and fun experience as well as get to know other secret sights and interact with locals at live events that otherwise would not be possible.

The user segmentation was carried-out, based on several studies of the profile of visitors to Porto - namely “Dados estudo conducente à estratégia de marketing e definição da identidade da marca para o turismo do Porto e norte de Portugal 2007-2015”, “Perfil dos turistas no aeroporto do Porto que visitam em Lazer/Férias o Porto e norte de Portugal 2009” and “ Perfil dos turistas do Porto e norte de Portugal 3ºtrimestre 2010”.

The target brand/region of the experiment is Porto city, with a connection to Douro. The three touristic products targeted by the story are City short breaks, Gastronomy and Wine. The target groups are tourists visiting the city on Vacations/Leisure. The story especially targets United Kingdom tourists - but all tourists are encouraged to participate.

Travelplot Porto encompasses the main activities tourists commonly participate in when visiting Porto – such as experimenting with Gastronomy, Visiting monuments, visiting Porto wine cellars and enjoying Museums.

Scope plane

One key element of transmedia storytelling is to create a universe that can support individual stories, which are told across multiple platforms. The history of a city or country is an immensely rich universe in itself - with its individual stories, locations, trademarks and historical characters.

The content of the Travelplot Porto was designed to be people-centered and to have a consistent unified experience across all platforms using each platform to exploit each of their best characteristics.

A mystery - to entice the tourists into getting more involved in the experience of visiting Porto and to follow the story across several media - was created. The tourists’ active involvement is rewarded with more information, culminating in solving the mystery. Hidden content has been created for the most enthusiastic tourists but the essence of the story has been kept simple so that everyone can follow and understand. Special attention has been paid to the fine-line between wanting more and being overwhelmed. The tourists are therefore able to focus on the level of experience they’re willing to invest themselves in (Peters, 2010).

By integrating all these characteristics, the travelplot Porto story was created. The tourists will follow Peter, an English tourist, on his mission to save Port wine. Through the protagonist’s eyes, tourists will be encouraged to get to know the city. This journey matches the heroes’ journey described by Joseph Campbell - where a hero venturing “Forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: Fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won” (Campbell, 1972:30). In order to succeed in his mission, Peter has to find the location of Bacchus’ cup and the remaining treasure, hidden over numerous centuries by the Cale, in several city locations. He must do this before Filipe, an ex-Cale member, finds it first. Only with the help of both tourists and locals can Peter find it before Filipe. With the support of new media, tourists will find the possible locations where the treasure is hidden, through an Iphone app, Map

or Website, while real live events and social networks will allow for interaction between participants.

Travelplot Porto is composed of an Iphone application - which is the main platform for this experience due to its mobility and its growing use by tourists as both a map and an information service; by a website – with the primary purpose of aggregating information from the experiment; through social networks such as Face book, Twitter, Pinterest and through a series of videos uploaded online - which will allow interactivity between characters and tourists; Porto maps with story information on them, which will be distributed at Porto tourism offices; and real world events such as gastronomy of Porto (Tripas à moda do Porto, Bacalhau à gomes de sá and francesinha), Wine tastings and a Douro cruise that also form part of the story. Tourists can also register to be present at the climax of the story.

The story-bible of travelplot Porto was created according to the rules lay out by transmedia producer Gomez (Gool, 2010). Amongst the chapters composing this bible are the logline, the overview of the city and historical context, the description of the real and fiction characters, the location and the timeline of the major events in the story.

Finding the audience is probably one of the most difficult aspects in a transmedia project. The participants of travelplot Porto will have their first contact when they first arrive in Porto - at local tourist offices or through the partners of the project. They can also discover travelplot Porto online at the official website, Iphone application, social networks, etc.

Tourists can easily understand the story since a brief synopsis is available at all main platforms so that tourists can delve into the narrative of the experiment.

The story, which travelplot Porto tells, encompasses the history of Porto – explaining its locations and its historical characters in a very simple and comprehensible way. Most of the story is based on real events. The story is divided into nine chapters that correspond to nine historical events in Porto city – such as the arrival of the Romans to Porto or the disaster of the Ponte das Barcas, one of its darkest pages. Each chapter of the story corresponds in the map to a “Narrative line” and each of the forty-two locations of the story corresponds to a “Stop”. Using the subway maps analogy, the tourists can choose any line and exit at any stop. There is no specific order that needs to be followed. The tourists can choose the location according to their tastes, proximity, chapter of the story, and so on.

Tourists aren’t obligated to go to a set number of locations or all locations. This is a collective project and it will be through the collaboration of all, that the story will have its resolution. Obviously the more locations the tourists go, the richer their experience will be.

Tourists can also choose their degree of participation. They can opt to visit two or three locations, or they can get more involved and follow the story before, during and after their trip. Even if they don’t visit Porto, they can still follow the story online.

Structure plane

In 330 b.C., Aristotle discussed the proper structure of the plot “Which has a beginning, a middle and an end. (...) a well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles” (Aristotle, 330 B.C.:14).

Travelplot Porto was structured according to these acts. The first act is where the characters and the story are presented; the second act includes the tourists and the protagonist’s journey through all the locations, their interaction and live events such as the gastronomy events, the cruise and the Wine tasting. The third and final act occurs at a secret location – with tourists and story characters in the same place. The resolution of the story concludes with the participation of all – participants are invited to submit a picture on a facebook page.

In this experience we aim to use the maximum of conventions possible so the tourists’ learning curve may be a small one.

All the platforms are at the same hierarchical level since they all contribute to part of the story. But the heart of the story is present at three main platforms: Iphone app, Website and Map.

Skeleton plane

The components and how they work together were defined in the wireframes created for each of the travelplot Porto platforms. These wireframes offer a visual reference for the design work and the project implementation.

Scope plane

The design, color palettes, typography, texts and pictures were created and then distributed to the rest of the travelplot Porto team. The platforms therefore have a unity and consistency of design.

Main results and contributions | Transmedia storytelling techniques are considered to be at the core of future communications, but its study in tourism is still at its infancy. How willing will tourists prove to interact with a transmedia story about the place they are visiting? What will the appetite for these kinds of products be? Can transmedia storytelling projects fulfill the needs of this new breed of tourists?

Travelplot Porto aims to start answering these questions by exploring location based transmedia storytelling techniques. In this summary, we have described its conception and design.

Limitations | Even though the results of travelplot Porto can only be applied within this specific context and as a consequence cannot be generalized, they should bring interesting insights, which will help us to begin to explore and understand tourists' new behavior.

Conclusions | Tourists now have access to vast quantities of information. The Internet has become a major resource - adding to the available information for tourists - but studies have shown that other sources of media remain relevant to them and have not been completely eclipsed by the web. Mobile applications in tourism are also increasingly successful – building on their ability to offer support to tourists within a destination, giving them access to information anytime and anywhere (Höpken *et al.*, 2010).

Even when travelling, many tourists choose to stay connected to the Internet and social networks. Sharing experiences while living them has become an important part of many people's vacation experience. Foreign locals, a new breed of travelers, are able to instantly familiarize themselves with their surroundings and understand the inner workings of a place. Due to their mobile resources, travelers are now much more able to tailor their experiences to their desires and tastes (JWT, 2011).

The human brain is wired for narratives and operates by association, detecting patterns in information. Stories are the most powerful form of communication - conveying not only information but also emotion (Rose, 2011:1). It is through stories that we give meaning to events in our life. According to Bonnie Buckner and Pamela Rutledge, stories are the center of every successful marketing campaign since they "provide an authentic human experience that taps into psychological fundamentals, making them the most effective way to engage audiences" (Rutledge, 2011b).

Storytelling is increasingly becoming a global marketing trend in the tourism industry. Studies have indicated that a story about a destination, be it factual or fictional, can give tourists "a more meaningful experience" and lend the location "a unique competitive advantage" (Mossberg *et al.*, 2010).

The explosion of native transmedia storytelling is a recent phenomenon. In the entertainment industry, which has mastered storytelling for decades, Weiler compares the current stage of transmedia storytelling to the silent film era (Kohn, 2011). In the tourism industry we have barely began its exploration. What is the impact of applying these techniques to the tourism industry? What are its advantages and disadvantages? What are the best practices?

Travelplot Porto is a pilot location based transmedia storytelling designed to gather data which will allow us to begin answering these questions.

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