Location Based Transmedia Storytelling in Social Media – Peter's TravelPlot Porto Case Study

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Abstract

Transmedia storytelling projects have recently been introduced in tourism. Their outcomes remain largely unknown. In 2012, a pilot location based transmedia storytelling experiment, TravelPlot Porto, took place in Porto, Portugal. During twelve weeks, tourists were invited to embark on a physical treasure hunt while visiting Porto or follow this treasure hunt through Peter's eyes, TravelPlot Porto story protagonist, on his Twitter, YouTube and Pinterest accounts. This study analyses the audience behaviour on Peter's social media channels, namely the reach, exposure and engagement achieved in this exploratory trial. The results indicate an interest and potential for location based transmedia storytelling projects.

Keywords: location based transmedia storytelling; social media; tourism.

1 Introduction and Theoretical Background

Humans instinctively organize their thoughts as stories. They think, remember and make sense of experiences though them (Haven, 2007:vii). Stories are no longer restricted to a single medium. Henry Jenkins defined transmedia storytelling in 2011 as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes it own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins, 2011). Social media is widely used by tourists (Milano, Baggio, & Piattelli, 2011). They are essential in the distribution of travel-related information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and a popular subject in tourism marketing (Pesonen, 2011). The use of narrative on social media brings several benefits in terms of audience connection and engagement but also in terms of marketing and promotion. The audience can connect emotionally with the character becoming his "friend" (Lewellen, Koppel, Lim & Pratten, 2011). From the first radio and television shows people would talk back to the medium as if they are talking to another person in the room. These relationships between audiences and the medium were then named parasocial interactions (Giles, 2002). With the advent of the Internet and social media, the fictional characters are able to talk back to the audience in real time, creating a deeper engagement with the story. Recently storytelling has been gaining attention in the tourism industry (Mossberg, Therkelsen, Huijbens, Björk, & Olsson, 2011). Some recent examples include the WhaiWhai guidebooks that by resorting to stories, help tourists to discover different cities, through a series of short stories that become readable after tourists solve the enigmas (WhaiWhai, 2011). Another example is China Heart that transports tourists to several locations in Sydney's Chinatown. This mobile app provides clues, oral stories and historic re-

enactments (China Heart, 2011). Tripventure.net, a platform for location-based games contains a tour guide with extra information. The players experience the city through a virtual story. They can choose to use a smartphone or a table PC (Tripventure, 2013). Even though storytelling has been widely used in tourism, social media storytelling applied to tourism is still in its infancy. This study aims to analyse the interaction of TravelPlot Porto story protagonist, Peter Smith, with the audience, on his Twitter, Pinterest and YouTube accounts. The results of this case study can contribute to a better understanding of the reach, impressions and engagement, location based storytelling projects might achieve in tourism.

2 TravelPlot Porto

TravelPlot Porto is a location based transmedia storytelling project that was launched between June 17th and September 9th 2012. During this period, tourists visiting Porto had the opportunity to discover the city of Porto through a treasure hunt. TravelPlot Porto story was scattered across different platforms such as a mobile application (iPhone and Android), a website, social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and YouTube), a print map and live events (Gastronomy, Wine Tasting, Douro River Cruise and Souvenirs) (Ferreira, Alves and Quico, 2012). In TravelPlot Porto story, Peter, an English tourist, was on a mission to find Porto's hidden treasure before the antagonist of the story, Filipe did. Throughout three different social media channels, Peter shared his daily progress with the audience. On Twitter he tweeted his immediate thoughts, on Pinterest he pined extra pictures and historical information and on YouTube he published a video log with his weekly adventures.

3 Methodology

The data collection took place between June 17th and September 10th 2012, which corresponded to the launch of Peter's social media and the day after the end of TravelPlot Porto. These data was gathered by analysing the pages of these three social media channels and by resorting to different online measuring tools that were available during this pilot experience like as TweetReach, PinReach and YouTube analytics. On September 10th 2012, there were 266 followers on Peter's Twitter account; 510 followers to Peter's Pinterest account; 912 views and five subscribers to Peter's YouTube Channel. Despite the PinReach data collection being done on September 10th, it didn't reflect the 510 followers given by the direct page analysis but only 508 followers.

From direct analysis, we were able to determine the genre and country of Peter's Pinterest account followers. There was no genre data available for 16 followers and no country data available for 54 followers. More than half of Peter's Pinterest followers were female (258), 197 followers were male, 36 followers were companies and the remaining 3 followers were a couple (male and female). There were representatives from fifty-five different countries & subdivisions following Peter. The countries with the biggest representation were the United States with 90 followers representing 18% of Peter's Pinterest followers, Portugal with 44 followers (9%), United Kingdom with 33 followers (7%), Spain with 32 followers (6%), Brazil with 30 followers (6%) and Canada with 29 followers (6%).

The YouTube analytics only provided information regarding the country of origin view. There were views from twenty-three countries. Portugal was the country with most views, 60,5% of the total views (552), followed by the United Kingdom with 29% of the views (265). The United States (20) and Brazil (16) had each 2%.

One of the researchers had an active interaction with the social networks. This interaction was kept to the minimum but two main factors contributed to this decision and therefore compromise: the need to check the material that was being uploaded and the need to promote TravelPlot Porto since there was no initial audience and no budget available for the distribution of this project. This pilot experience was tested in a real world environment.

4 Results

Peter's Twitter account was launched on June 17th 2012, with the link to his first weekly video log. On July 30th 2012, there were 201 users following Peter's adventure, six weeks later there were 266 followers. Despite this slow growth, the engagement with Peter grew on the last few weeks of TravelPlot Porto. The turning point was Peter's trip to Douro, which started on August 24th. For example one followers tweeted "*It's stunning, u gonna love it ... enjoy!!!" and "Wow beautiful!!! ... thks 4 sharing, wish I could be there too, I'll be waiting for more pictures* ☺". There were tweets indicating the desire to join the story such as "*I'm from Porto, know & love some of these places, but never bothered to visit certain places, after your pic's I'll change that* ;)" while another follower tweeted "*your tweets are making me wanna go treasure hunting in Porto*".

TweetReach describes reach as "the number of unique twitter accounts that received tweets about your query" (TweetReach, 2013) or by other words, the total number of unique Twitter users that received tweets about the search term. The biggest reach of Peter's Twitter account occurred on July 19th, when 3706 unique twitter users received tweets about his journey. After July 19th, with the exception of September 5th, the reach of Peter's twitter account remained constant between 2719 and 3706 unique users reached. TweetReach defines exposure as "the total number of impressions generated by tweets in your report" (Tweetreach, 2013). The highest exposure of Peter's twitter account occurred on August 21st, with 17621 total impressions. This matches Peter's investigation into Port Wine and his trip to Douro. The second highest exposure took place at the end of the project with 10951 impressions. The ratio between reach and exposure represents "the depth of penetration of tweets about a topic" (TweetReach Blog, 2011). The overall average ratio throughout Peter's treasure hunt was average (0.27) which indicates a normal distribution of tweets, retweets and amplification.

Peter used Pinterest to share his pictures. The vast majority of the boards corresponded to one location of the story. On September 10th, according to PinReach, there were 41 boards with a total of 268 pins, 72 repins, 101 liked pins and 2 comments. The most far reaching board was Saint Bento Train Station, composed by 7 pins and followed by 496 followers. The next two far reaching boards were two Porto monuments - Tripeiros monument (had 7 pins and 493 followers) and Bandeirinha da Saúde (11 pins and 492 followers). The most popular name of the

followers' boards had one or a combination of these three words: Travel & Places & Spaces. A total of 16 repins were done onto this board. The second most popular name of the followers' boards was Portugal with 8 repins, followed by Science-nature-animals with 4 repins. There were also 5 boards with a repin each related to gastronomy (Portuguese Food; Livro de Receitas, Delicious, Food Styling and Food and Drink).

Ten of the uploaded videos onto Peter's YouTube channel had 70% of total views (635 views in 912 views). The video with the most views was the first episode of Peter's journey with a total of 275 views. All the four videos on Saint John's Festival were on the top ten videos uploaded to this YouTube Channel, totalling 218 views. In the top ten videos were also the second, third and forth episodes. There were nine likes (five from the United Kingdom and one from Germany, Portugal, United States and Italy), two comments and one share. The day with the most views was the day of the launch of Peter's Channel with 108 views. The following day had 55 views. The next video was uploaded on June 24th upload and had 98 views, the following day had 59 views and the next one 54 views.

5 Conclusions

TravelPlot Porto story was scattered along several platforms namely social media that aimed to be a direct mean of communication between the project and the audience. Three of the social media channels were used by Peter, the story protagonist. These outlets intended to engage audiences by bringing the fictional world into the real world through social interaction and to provide extra content to the fans with greater character and scenario details.

During the twelve weeks of the duration of the project, Peter's Twitter was followed by 266 users and saw the engagement grow on the last few weeks of the project with several users interacting with Peter on his adventure. The overall average of the reach/exposure ratio of Peter's twitter account was average. Some parasocial relationships took place, which created a deeper engagement with the story and invited followers to engage with TravelPlot Porto's different platforms. Peter's followers expressed on their tweets, the desire to join the treasure hunt and visited the featured places in the story. Peter's Pinterest account was the social media channel with the most followers, 510 followers from fifty-five different country & subdivisions. Within a total of 268 pins, there were 72 repins and 101 liked pins. The two most popular names for the repin followers board was one or a combination of these three words - Travel & Places & Spaces – and Portugal. The names of these boards indicate that Peter's pictures served as a promotional element to the city of Porto and Portugal. As for Peter's YouTube Channel, there were 912 views from twenty-three countries. The first episodes of the story were the most watched; this can translate a low engagement level in this platform despite the time-release factor also playing an important role in the view number of the more recent videos.

Amongst the limitations that prevented TravelPlot Porto's growth was the inexistence of a promotion and advertising budget, not having a dedicated community manager or a community already in place since it was a new brand, the lack of budget for content creation, and the limited time of the experience. Despite these main limitations, the

results in terms of reach, exposure and engagement, indicate an interest to follow the story of TravelPlot Porto through the protagonist eyes. However, they represent a single exploratory case study and cannot be generalized.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all partners of TravelPlot Porto: University of Porto; Engineering Faculty of the University of Porto; INESC TEC/ INESC Porto; Foundation for Science and Technology; UT AustinIPortugal Program - International Collaboratory for Emerging Technologies (CoLab); Turismo de Porto e Norte de Portugal; Oportonity City; Câmara Municipal do Porto – Pelouro do Conhecimento e Coesão Social; Douro Valley; Cálem; DouroAzul; Vinhas d'Alho; Porto com Arte; Yellow Pictures; Light Films; Rádio Televisão Portuguesa; Escola Superior Artística do Porto; Webcomum; NextPower Norte and Project "A place for Joãozinho".