Connecting Cat - A Transmedia Learning Project

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Abstract. In this paper we present an overview of a transmedia learning project. As part of an ongoing research project, Connecting Cat provides glimpses of a story taking place in the material, physical world, and the imaginary world through image, sound and text. Specifically targeted to English as Second Language students, the project supports entry points for learning through immersion in an adventure story and engagement in multimodal learning activities.

Keywords: ESL · language learning · transmedia storytelling

1 Introduction

Transmedia storytelling as a process of "crafting stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, in which each piece interacts with others to deepen the whole - but is capable of standing on its own - giving the audience the choice as to how deep into the experience they go" [1] presents the potential to be used for educational purposes.

Transmedia learning environments allow to shift the balance of agency as learners "become hunters and gatherers pulling together information from multiple sources to form a new synthesis"; to become "active publishers of knowledge" [2]. They also allow to "broaden the mix of representational modes in which students express their knowledge and to build collaborative knowledge cultures" [3].

There is a lack of documented cases that may widen the understanding of the use of transmedia storytelling in educational context or to what extent it may add value to teaching or learning by enhancing the effectiveness of learning. As part of an ongoing research, the project Connecting Cat was created to provide a basis for assessment and reflection on the affordances of transmedia storytelling for learning in general and language learning in particular.

2 Narrative Features and Experience Design

The project is targeted to adolescent English as Second Language - ESL students and focusses on the exploration of contents and curricular goals of ESL, CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) - level B1. Through

this project, one intends to provide space for the development of communication skills and engagement in the topics: media culture, multiculturalism, linguistic diversity and use of technology. It is also aimed at developing media literacy and engaging students in multimodal learning experiences. Students are invited to unfold fragments of an adventure story of a teen girl seeking portal pieces in different locations to connect humans to a tribe of alien warriors via diversified media platforms.

The story is set both in a primary world, to unveil the heroine's journey, and a secondary world to allow for the exploration of a mystical dimension, in this case, an alien warriors' world. The segments of the story are presented through micronarratives - hierarchical, modular and accumulative "units of self-contained narrative coherence and flow that are critical to the formation of narrative meaning" [4]. They contribute to the overall experience of the narrative and encapsulate the required context to explore the topics. Participants of the storyworld are invited to shape and expand it through the creation of their representations and hypotheses about content and language.

The learning framework is embedded in the storyworld. Drawing from Kurek & Hauck's multiliteracy training approach [5], the interactions within the storyworld were designed to scaffold a process of reception, participation and contribution - "Similarly to what is happening in a language classroom, the learner is guided from observation of the desired acts, through their interpretation to the final performance"[5]. The gateways to the storyworld are set forth via a website. The navigation within the framework allows for a cumulative or complementary exploration of the elements, linear or non-linear.

3 Enhancing Learning Opportunities

The storyworld integrates platforms that provide learning inputs and platforms targeted to the creation of learning outputs. The goal was to create a meaningful experience that would allow for the progression from reception to contribution.

The first webisode establishes the setting for the story. The main character discovers her alien identity and mission - to seek pieces to assemble a portal and connect mankind to an alien tribe. "Who am I?" can be explored to raise awareness to diverse types of linguistic discourse and discursive practices in the L2. Students can critically evaluate discourse and develop conversation skills using the webisode as the setting.

Parallel to the events in the primary world, a different narrative thread is set to unfold the culture and life of an alien tribe through a motion book sequence. The events in "Allure" were crafted to provide learning inputs related to the topic linguistic diversity. Besides visual elements, the sequence is enhanced by audio elements to immerse the students in the topic. The sequence is available via the Madefire application. It adapts the graphic conventions of comic books - imaginative and supportive typography, strip panels, and speech bubbles to guide the act of reading. The progression in the narrative is dependant on interactions, exchanges and movements of the readers. For ESL learning purposes, it presents

the potential to explore receptive communication skills and reinforce meaning through different modes of representation. In terms of interpretation activities, students can identify biased or exploitative situations and report and rephrase information provided visually in the sequence or communicate about other modes on a metalevel.

The second webisode is an interactive video created via the Interlude platform. "Seek and you shall find" provides a multilayered video experience in which students can make choices within a set of narrative threads. It is set in London, where the protagonist is on a quest to find a portal piece. The setting and interactions with secondary characters were intentionally integrated to exploit the topics of linguistic diversity and multiculturalism. Besides authentic immersion in "World Englishes", the webisode depicts multicultural aspects of the city such as museums or world food markets. Different events provide learning inputs such as discourses representing various cultures, genres, intentions, communication modes and linguistic diversity.

In the location-based quest "AWOL", students aid the main character to solve the mystery of a missing portal piece and its guardian. The interactive elements seek to engage students in solving puzzles and clues through which they can develop reading and listening skills such as scanning or inferencing. The quest explores the topic media and is targeted to develop "reflective reception" [5], by accessing written and audiovisual information. To complete the quest, students need to express themselves through "thoughtful and purposeful online participation" [5] by interacting with Cat via her Facebook page. The story triggers are set via the mobile augmented reality application Aurasma. The primary goal is to make the story tangible to students by using a learner-centered and active participation approach.

Students can communicate with diegetic characters via Facebook pages. The posts reflect impressions related to the quests while expanding knowledge on the learning topics. By interacting with characters they are encouraged to develop accuracy on the linguistic level while using mechanisms of self-expression. The posts are also resources to exploit discourse issues such as argumentation and negotiation skills, pragmatic competence or even net-etiquette in L2 - "Learners are expected not only to interpret the meaning conveyed through input but also to articulate their own opinions by deliberately choosing and imitating a particular convention or type of discourse" [5].

Through the blog "Fluxus Log Archive", a file repository collected by humans to enlighten the tribe about human activities, students can become co-creators of the storyworld. The objective is to engage students in the topics, activate prior knowledge and skills, as well as develop media literacy skills. They can remix and recycle modes, genres and symbols to forge new interpretations or representations of the storyworld through the creation of digital artifacts such as podcasts, videos or wikis.

On the basis of enhancing learning via interactions on digital spaces, the project contemplates the construction of an online community of educators and students. Edmodo, given its affordances, allows for the creation of a space

through which users can interact, share resources and discuss content correlated to the storyworld.

Fig. 1. Screenshots of a scene of the motion book sequence and an interactive menu set in webisode 2

4 Future Work

The primary purpose of this PhD research project is to deepen the understanding of the implementation of transmedia practices in ESL learning context. For the collection of data regarding the students' experiences of the storyworld, a set of observational tools will be used to analyze the participation in the social platforms and materials produced by students. The participants' experience will also be mapped by tracking predefined points of interaction within the storyworld. During the study case, interviews and questionnaires will be conducted to provide a body of data that can be scrutinized to interpret trends emerging from the participants' experiences. The goal is the systematic description and analysis of the implementation of the project, taking into account the subjective experiences of participants.

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