


Chapter 19

Genius Loci and Cultural Heritage: An Interactive Narrative for the Ruins of Egnatia

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ABSTRACT

One of the main challenges of cultural heritage is to enhance the visit to ancient ruins, in which what remains is difficult to interpret. For this reason, the authors designed an alternate reality game by making use of tangible devices to improve the experience of wandering around the ruins of Egnatia (Fasano, Brindisi, Italy). They tried to evoke the “Genius Loci,” the sacral spirit of a territory, that is analysed according to its dimensions in the field of human-computer interaction. Those dimensions are enchantment, ambiguity, bodily experience, topology of the place, the dialogue between the past and the present, and the perceptual gestalt.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural Heritage (CH) is a very important resource for conveying data about societies of the past. Daily life experiences, artistic and religious practices of ancient populations can provide a feeling of connection between antique societies and the present time, an explanation of who we are today, and a sense of belonging to something much greater than us. One of the main role of Cultural Heritage practices is to

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enhance visits to ancient ruins, activity that is usually hindered by the fact that the artifacts remaining are difficult to interpret. For example, the site of Egnatia has only some roads, foundations, and walls left (fig. 1). The primary purpose of this project is to bring back and heighten the magic, the ambiguous, the sinister, and the emotional to the archaeological park of Egnatia. We wanted to achieve that by enhancing Genius Loci of this place. For that reason, we designed an alternate reality game (ARG, in McGonigal; 2012) by making use of tangible devices to improve the experience of wandering around the ruins of Egnatia. Visitors, thus, learn about the ancient city of the Messapii all the way to Roman times, their culture and daily life while playing our game. In particular, we tried to evoke the “Genius Loci”, the sacred spirit of a territory, with the aim to create a suspenseful atmosphere, in which the players are taken back into the past of ancient Romans. As already mentioned, we designed this game by making use of several tangible devices meant to help to discover an interactive narrative in which characters inspired by Roman history tell a story while revealing elements of daily life of those past societies. We designed smart objects that unlock narrative elements in video format, to create a game in which visitors can walk about the ancient city, while solving problems and learning about its daily life. We initially designed this game for children from 7 to 11 years (Torsi et. al. 2020), but during the first cycle of evaluation with 5 tourist guides, some of the participants pointed out that the game could also be interesting for adult tourists (in particular foreigners).

This chapter begins with a review of the relevant literature, followed by a description of the physical setting of the archaeological park. Next we explore the concept of Genius Loci, its origins, and its applications, after which we describe how Genius Loci has been interpreted by Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). Finally, we present the game and we conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of our findings.

Figure 1. A view of the archaeological park of Egnatia



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