MARIA ECONOMOU
Joint Curator / Lecturer in Museum Studies

Humanities Advanced Technology & Information Institute (HATII) & Hunterian Museum
University of Glasgow, United Kingdom
@MariaEcoGl

Maria, what is your background?

I'm based at the University of Glasgow and my post is a joint one, funded half by the Hunterian Museum and half by the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute (HATII) where I'm a lecturer at Museum Studies. One of HATII's research areas is digital heritage and my own research focuses on the use and evaluation of digital tools for interpretation. I am also responsible for developing The Hunterian's Digital Strategy. You can see how the two parts of my post complement each other and make it a very interesting job. The idea of using digital tools to tell stories has always been an interest of mine.

The Hunterian Museum is a cultural partner in a project on digital storytelling. Could you tell us more about it?

Indeed we are partners in the Horizon 2020 EMOTIVE project to which we brought both our international research expertise in evaluating digital cultural heritage, as well the real cultural heritage context of the Hunterian Museum as one of the two cultural case studies of the project. In our collection we have impressive Roman artefacts from the World Heritage site of the Antonine Wall, a monument cutting across Scotland that used to be the most northerly frontier of the Roman Empire. Our team has studied this collection and the findings show us interesting information about the life of Roman soldiers at the frontier and their interaction with the local population. With this project, we wanted to understand how to tell stories using digital tools and how to create a deeper empathetic engagement with our visitors. Life at the frontier involved conflict, migration, family life struggles, surviving: all universal problems that users can easily connect to. But different visitors have different knowledge levels and interests: how will they react when they look at the collection, how can we trigger deep engagement and emotion in different sets of people? Storytelling and digital storytelling could be the answer and we wanted to research these questions in a real museum environment.

This February we ran our first EMOTIVE project Experience Design workshop and we invited, besides the project partners, scientists, game developers, interaction designers, content specialists, and cultural heritage interpretation experts. This workshop was a prototype for designing experiences. We are currently working on the scenarios and the different stories and aim to create the digital prototypes after that, but this was the first stage to see what the user requirements would be. The digital tools we plan to create later (VR, animations, etc.) would need to match the needs of our visitors. In order to do that effectively, we used 5 personas (fictional characters based on our visitor studies research). For example, one persona was Mary, an older educated, retired history teacher from Scotland, visiting the museum with Annie, her bored teenage grand-daughter who is quite artistic and highly engaged on social media. Two different profiles, whose emotions would be triggered very differently and who would probably engage in different ways with the collections and exhibition themes. The experience from the workshop showed us that a modular storytelling strategy might be more appropriate: we realised that by creating multiple snapshots of information, via different platforms (digital and non-digital, onsite and offsite) that can be put together in diverse ways to create a bigger narrative, we could engage many different profiles of visitors.


The first EMOTIVE project Experience Design workshop with the project partners, scientists, game developers, interaction designers, content specialists, and cultural heritage interpretation experts.

MULTIPLE SNAPSHOTS OF INFORMATION, IN DIFFERENT PLATFORMS, PUT TOGETHER TO CREATE A BIGGER NARRATIVE, CAN ENGAGE DIFFERENT PROFILES OF VISITORS

For instance, another of our Hunterian EMOTIVE personas was Calum, Annie's younger brother who couldn't come to the museum, but also wanted to be engaged in the museum experience remotely. Via online tools, he could ask his sister about what was going on, allowing us to explore hybrid visiting scenarios, combining both onsite and online.

Can you do all this on a tight budget?

Parts of it, yes. EMOTIVE plans on developing authoring tools for cultural and creative industries. I can also quickly tell you about another project I was recently involved in, very low budget: it was based on the Travellers' Tails project and the related temporary exhibition "The Kangaroo & The Moose" that we put together at The Hunterian, around a painting which travelled to our museum. For this, we created a digital trail exploring stories that are still engaging users on our web platform even though the exhibition is now closed. George Stubbs painted the earliest representation of a kangaroo in Western art. The Kangaroo painting was commissioned by Joseph Banks who took part in James Cook's first voyage to the Pacific in the eighteenth century. The painting was going to be sold to a private party but the public successfully appealed to keep it in the public sphere with a campaign organised by Royal Museums Greenwich. As part of the project, the Kangaroo painting travelled around the country, so everyone could see it and in each city, the exhibition was adapted to the local collections. At the Hunterian Museum we have another painting by Stubbs: The Moose, commissioned by our founder, William Hunter. The two depictions were exhibited in the Hunterian Art Gallery, but we also have a very interesting permanent collection kept at another location with anthropological, zoological, and paleontological collections which we wished to connect to the same story. And here digital tools were of great help. We created a digital trail with multiple short digital stories, to highlight the objects, connect them to each other and to the exhibition themes and make it easier to find them in the space. We put these stories on a website which can also be used as an app, still being visited today. So yes, you can do transmedia on a budget, but it is important that you know your collections, your users, and what you want to achieve when you embark on this.
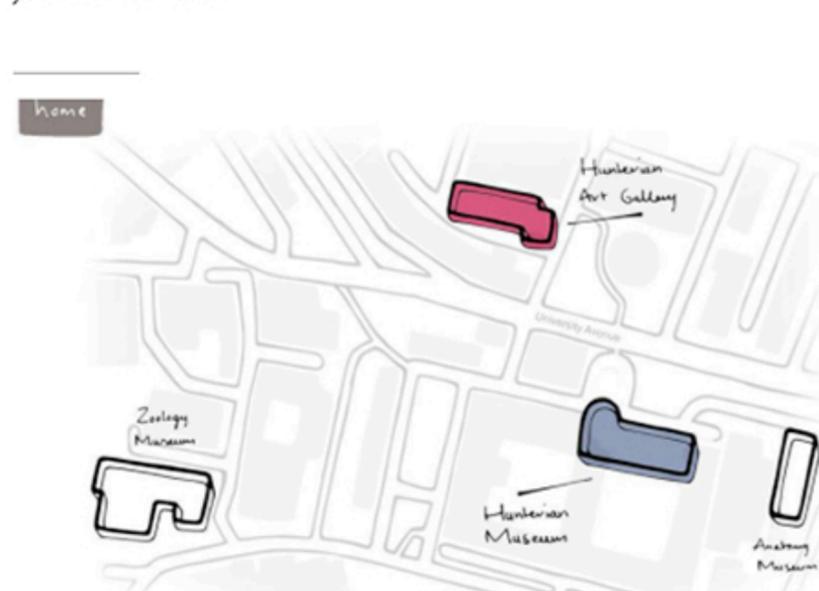
What would be your advice to anyone wanting to tell a story across digital media?

To museums that haven't started on the digital interpretation path yet, and are afraid to do so because of budget constraints, I would say: don't underestimate the skills you already have in house. If you're in the cultural sector, maybe you aren't doing it digitally yet, but you do know storytelling techniques, how to engage your visitors, how to highlight interesting facts about your collections, etc.

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE SKILLS YOU ALREADY HAVE IN HOUSE

These are all valuable skills and experiences. Now you need a bit of time to learn about the digital tools and experiment. Start small, explore partnerships, listen and observe your users. And finally, don't forget to give back: be open, go to conferences, post on blogs and share your struggles as much as your successes with the professional community.