Transmedia Storytelling as an Educational Strategy:  
A Prototype for Learning English as a Second Language

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ABSTRACT
This paper proposes the use of transmedia storytelling in an educational context. Transmedia stories are perceived as opportunities to create a new learning scenario that allows for the development of innovative student-centred educational practices, and the implementation of collaborative strategies that ultimately meet the 21st-century students’ needs. Through the discussion of a transmedia learning project targeted to English as Second Language students, this paper attempts to provide insight on how learning activities and strategies can be embedded in the digital narrative and experience layers of a storyworld.

KEYWORDS
ESL, Interactive Platforms, Language Learning, Transmedia Learning, Transmedia Storytelling

INTRODUCTION
Stories are mystifying and forge emotional connections. Fiction, in particular, stimulates empathy with characters that seems real. As communication tools, they provide understanding and entertainment. Independent of the medium - books, web series, comic books, films or games, stories engage audience members in a narrative experience that becomes a unique enterprise that differs from individual to individual.

The internet has given rise to a new form of narrative “one that’s told through many media at once in a way that’s nonlinear, that’s participatory and often game-like, and that’s designed above all to be immersive” (Rose, 2011, p. 3). Stories are universal nevertheless, the way they are told changes with the medium through which they emerge. As participatory media proliferate, storytelling does too. In this context, transmedia storytelling emerges as a mean of creation and expression of the “Millennial generation”, a definition introduced by Howe and Strauss (2000, p. 4).

Transmedia Storytelling is 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” (Weaver, 2013, p. 8). In a nutshell, Weaver (2013, p.12) compares the transmedia approach to storytelling to the creation of a handshake. The audience has the chance to return the handshake by consuming one piece and then deciding if they want to continue the conversation by seeing what else is in the storyworld.

As passive viewers become active users and participants, transmedia provides a set of tools and techniques that can reach and engage young audiences, often through multiple interfaces, platforms,
and devices. Gomez (2014) refers to the “Millenials” as the most published and social generation in the history of humanity. He argues they are also the “Transmedia Generation” since they can take different parts of a story, delivered across different platforms, and assemble a whole that suits the level with which they want to engage with the material.

The exploration of the educational uses of transmedia practices has become a prevalent topic of discussion in recent years. From an educational point of view, transmedia learning environments allow to shift the balance of agency as students “become hunters and gatherers pulling together information from multiple sources to form a new synthesis” to become “active publishers of knowledge” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 46). They also allow to “broaden the mix of representational modes in which students express their knowledge and to build collaborative knowledge cultures” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 84).

This paper seeks to highlight the potential of the use transmedia learning environments and related interfaces by looking into a transmedia project in the context of ESL - English as Second Language learning. By tapping into the conception, design, and application of the prototype, the authors seek to assess its validity, relevance for educators and students, and appropriateness for educational use. The first section of the paper provides the educational context and goals of the project. The following section presents the narrative design of the prototype, while the third is dedicated to an overview of the core elements that constitute the storyworld. The paper concludes with points for future research development and briefly discusses the challenges that might emerge during the process.

**THE PROJECT’S GOALS**

Connecting Cat is part of an ongoing research concerning the creation of a transmedia learning environment in the context of ESL learning. It is targeted to Portuguese 10th-grade students, 16-year-old teenagers. Connecting Cat’s storyworld is designed to be the setting of exploration of contents and curricular goals of ESL, level B1, according to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). The project uses a multilayered combination of audiovisual elements within a storyworld to shed light on the topics: media culture, multiculturalism, linguistic diversity and use of technology. The storyworld is constructed to allow expansion and dynamic personalization of its elements while enhancing the development of communication and media literacy skills.

By exploring the different aspects provided in the storyworld, students are able to move from informed reception of input to responsive participation in opinion-generating activities and creative contribution of multimodal outputs. Kurek and Hauck (2014, p. 120) argue “language learners who can comfortably alternate in their roles as semiotic responders and semiotic initiators will reflect the success of training that takes account of multimodality as a core element of digital literacy skills”.

When considering the participatory and mediated nature of the students’ context, transliteracy becomes a key educational issue - “consuming and producing content across multifarious media platforms is a basic life skill for the twenty-first century” (Fleming, 2013, p. 373). Taking into account the need to equip students to communicate and express in the 21st-century mediascape, Connecting Cat seeks to promote transliteracy - the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools, and media” (Thomas et al., 2007). For this effect, the storyworld provides spaces for self-expression, interaction and participation within a shared culture disseminated in the storyworld. Warren et al. (2013, p. 69) argue that a “transmedia story is never ending, and it is continuously reshaped with the help of peer constative feedback”. Thus, it can be perceived as “a continuous learning process where linear learning is no more. Instead, multimodal experiences allow learners to seek, weigh, and communicate answers. Knowledge is found socially constructed based on existing knowledge” (idem).
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