Abstract: this article investigates the effect of using E-learning transmedia practices to facilitate foreign language acquisition in university level Chinese students. In particular the article refutes the stereotype that Chinese students are passive consumers of instruction. On the contrary, the introduction of the transmedia approach employing different media platforms to develop a participatory culture demonstrates that Chinese students are able to take responsibility in creating, sampling and remixing digital media for dissemination to their peers, who successfully navigate and comment on these multiple modalities to actively learn.

Introduction

‘Transmedia storytelling represents 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’ (Jenkins, 2007). This is exemplified in the Matrix franchise that comprises self-contained movies, animated shorts, video games and comic books so that the fictional universe can only be fully understood by accessing each medium. Dedicated fans then participate in this universe by discussing, analyzing and re-imagining it on internet message boards; and by creating new aspects of it in the form of fan fiction. They are motivated not only by interest in the unfolding of a complex fictional narrative, but also by the social connectivity participatory analysis on the internet entails.

Inspired by this concept, our idea has been to apply the transmedia storytelling process to foreign language acquisition to enable learners to become participants and creators of media products that facilitate genuine comprehension of key teaching points. We produced, therefore, a transmedia project of 10 weeks duration to teach our students a French grammar point. We based our project on the 5 different usages of the Imparfait and the Passé Composé and created with the students 5 different self-contained products that are disseminated across multiple delivery channels – two videos, a computer game, a comic and a radio program. Each one contributes towards an understanding of the grammar point. Therefore, if students study, re create and comment on each, at the end, they will have a full knowledge of the 5 differences between the use of the Imparfait and the Passé Composé and a full understanding of the grammatical point in question.

This paper outlines, firstly, why Chinese students are seen as passive learners. It then explains that access to the internet has fostered an engagement in participatory cultures in China that can be utilized pedagogically through a transmedia approach. The concepts of participatory culture and transmedia storytelling are then explained, before a description is given of the 5 transmedia products the students and tutors created. The paper demonstrates that despite having been trained in passive teacher-centered educational environments, Chinese students are able to become independent and active learners. Finally, we suggest how the transmedia process could be applied to teach different subjects.
Passive Students?

‘Asian (especially East Asian) learners [are often] ... arguably reported as reticent and passive learners’.
(Xiaotang, 2000, p.435). We can locate the origin of this stereotype on the perception by Western educators that the Confucian ideal of a hierarchical, harmonious and conflict-free society where the leaders hold the truth results in an atmosphere of passivity in the classroom. Indeed the key Chinese concept of harmony, in which citizens not so much conform but control their actions within the public eye to avoid societal friction, seems to be in stark contrast to the ancient Greek concept of personal agency which places a premium on freedom and individualism (Nesbett, 2005, p.429). However, whether the philosophical foundations of Western and Eastern civilization account for perceived differences in classroom behavior is open to debate. Xiaotang warns against seeing ‘cultural attributes [as] an easier diagnosis for all problems arising in [foreign language teaching] practices’ and asks us to consider re-examining our teaching methodologies instead (2000, p.435). Therefore, if educational materials can be created that empower learners by reducing the risk of losing face, there is no reason why Easterner and Westerner alike could not benefit. Indeed, with globalization and the cultural anonymity afforded by informal learning cultures on the internet, culturally constructed barriers to self-expression can be somewhat dismantled leading to perceived differences between East and West becoming less valid. Thus, while institutional aspects of Chinese society such as school and college education may be conservative and encourage passivity of the learner, the internet has led to a generation of ‘netizens’ who are active participants in both the domestic Chinese Web and the World Wide Web. These are people who debate and share ideas on message boards and social networking sites such as Kaixin and RenRen (similar to the blocked Facebook site); who sample and create digital media using Youtube type sites such as Tudou and Youku; who collaborate to solve problems on Baidu (China’s version of Wikipedia); and bloggers who post on Twitter type sites such as Sina Weibo to express their creativity and concerns. These internet platforms allow participatory cultures to flourish as digital spaces in which netizens can participate and create.

Participatory Cultures

A participatory culture is one in which members are free to express themselves artistically, feel socially connected, engage in civic discourse, and receive strong creative support and informal mentoring from the most experienced members. Participatory cultures include Affiliations such as Facebook, message boards and metagaming; Expressions such as digital sampling, fan video making and Fan fiction writing; Collaborative Problem-solving such as Wikipedia and alternative reality gaming; and Circulations such as podcasting and blogging (Jenkins et al, 2009, p.3). Some of these ‘Affinity Spaces’, or informal learning cultures, that young people engage in have been condemned for shortening attention spans and encouraging gaming ‘addictions’ (Russell, 2000), but they have also been commended for helping young people develop social multi-tasking skills across a variety of digital media; exactly the type of skills that may be vital in a globalised work place (Jenkins et al, 2009). Indeed, the criticism that concurrent use of digital media weakens literary skills has been challenged by those who point out that online fan communities, for instance, help participants to develop their writing ability as they closely read the original texts that motivate them and then provide editorial feedback (Black, 2005). However, there are three valid concerns with informal participatory cultures that policymakers and educators need to address: unequal access to knowledge and digital tools; inability of youngsters to fully comprehend how media shapes world views; and a lack of professional ethics training to prepare them as public media participants and creators (Jenkins et al, 2009). These issues can be mitigated by educational approaches that adopt the principles of participatory culture to train students in media literacy and other subjects through the creation of products that engage and stimulate the imagination.

Transmedia

In order to tap into the students’ experience of informal participatory culture we chose the concept of transmedia storytelling as the vehicle for language acquisition since this approach allows fans/learners to access different types of digital media concurrently to gain a greater understanding of a fictional universe or learning concept. The media industry already successfully uses transmedia to engage consumers passively and actively across multiple self-contained media platforms, with the Matrix franchise being a clear example. Therefore, it is important to understand what motivates dedicated fans to access all the entry points to the Matrix universe: three feature films, a series of animated cartoons, several computer games, and two comic book collections. The Matrix franchise has become a
cult artifact because it is ‘encyclopedic, containing a rich array of information that can be drilled, practiced, and mastered by devoted consumers’ (Jenkins, 2006, p. 97). This, of course, is exactly what language tutors wish their students would be motivated to do. The other compelling reason for fans to access all the Matrix media and then participate in Internet communication is a desire for social connectivity. The desire, then, to master a universe and tell everyone about it is a powerful incentive. Perhaps our products will not contain the myriad cultural allusions to be found within the Matrix universe, but the fact that they are created and commented on by students who are already motivated to master a foreign language within a collaborative social setting is a powerful inducement for learners to get involved.

The Project

Our project [http://gus.nottingham.edu.cn/blogs/filippo-gilardi/category/transmedia/] rests on the assumption that our students are knowledgeable and experienced in various internet based participatory cultures, such as metagaming or social networking, but may not have experienced accessing a variety of these in pursuit of a greater understanding of just one point; be it the Matrix universe or a grammatical function of a target language. Therefore, we have constructed 5 different media products that allow the students to fully comprehend and comment on the 5 different usages of the Imparfait and the Passé Composé in French.

The 1st product ([http://folders.nottingham.edu.cn/staff/zlizfg/impvyspc1lipod.mp4]) is a video file published on the tutor’s blog that explains the difference between description (imparfait) and action (passé composé). Entering this blog students are able to watch the video and then post comments using the difference explained in the video and critique it. Students are also encouraged to react to the comments of others. The tutor only corrects major errors as his/her most important task is to monitor students’ comments and encourage them to praise good usage and peer-correct common errors while conforming to ethical guidelines. The tutor’s role is essentially that of a message board moderator responsible for guiding the students towards autonomy of learning.

The 2nd creation ([http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjE5OY3MDQw.html]) is a short video comedy acted, produced and edited by students. This video explains how the imparfait is used to introduce an action in the past that is stopped by another action introduced by the passé composé. The video was broadcast on Nottingham University Television station (NUTS) and linked to the blog. Once more students were encouraged to leave a comment and write a sentence using the grammatical rules explained in the comedy. Tutors had the same moderating role as in the first video file, giving suggestions only when major problems arose. At this stage some students were already becoming creative and active learners – they wrote the script, auditioned the actors, set rehearsals, choose music and designed the graphics. Other students were participating actively by reflecting on the grammar point explained, writing examples of its usage on the blog message board and commenting on the video itself.

The 3rd grammar point ([http://folders.nottingham.edu.cn/staff/zlizfg/transmediacomputergame.exe]) is explained via a computer game written by a tutor and students using the Lite Edition of Game Maker. By playing this game, students learned the difference between how to use the passé composé to speak about a precise moment in the past and how to use the imparfait to talk about an undetermined moment in the past. At the same time they reviewed the grammar points they had studied through the other platforms. The computer game has been designed to be attractive for University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) students by having the university map as the background of the first stage. The goal is to move an avatar to reach an exam paper by avoiding books that move randomly across the screen. Before going to the exam paper, students can reach a bonus placed in the center of the screen that will give them an explanation of the grammar point and the necessary knowledge required to answer a question to progress to the next stage. If the avatar crashes against an exploding book, students need to answer a question about the grammar point presented in any of the other 4 transmedia products to be able to continue the game. When students reach the exam paper they must answer a question about the grammar point being presented in the computer game to progress to the next stage. If the answer is wrong they lose marks, and they start again in the same stage; if the answer is right they get 20 marks and move onto the labyrinth stage, where the dangerous books move more quickly. Students were informed about the availability of this video game through the blog and once more asked to comment on and critique it. In the second phase of the project a more sophisticated computer game where students can choose which language skills to improve will be developed. In this second phase of the project students will be asked to peer review the questions to be put on the computer game through the blog.

The 4th transmedia product ([http://folders.nottingham.edu.cn/staff/zlizfg/Comicolour.pdf]) is a fan fiction comic produced with the guidance of a tutor and set in the established Chinese narrative of Xi Yangyang and Hui Tailang (an animated universe of sheep and wolves), which students find appealing. The theory behind using
established narratives is that novice media creators benefit from working within an extant fictional universe as they are not expected to produce characters from scratch. This lowers the entry barrier to artistic expression and is a key concept of engagement in participatory cultures (Jenkins et al, 2009, p.7). The comic explains the difference between when the time of an action is indicated (passé compose), and when the action is repeated habitually (imparfait). Several copies of the comic were made available as print-media at the university library front-desk so that motivated early-adopters could discover them and comment on the blog. Subsequently, the early adopters digitized the comic and posted it on the blog for a larger audience, some of whom will remix and sample the narrative to create more comics, computer games, texts or videos expounding further grammatical and lexical points of the target language.

The 5th product (http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/wJVMOLeuKj8/) is a student radio discussion with a representative song used to explain the last grammar difference: the uses of passé composé to speak about a physical or emotional state which changes and the use of the imparfait to describe a situation where the physical or emotional states do not change. The students were asked to comment on the song on the blog and create their own karaoke versions which they will post on the blog.

Findings

One of the main challenges of an English Medium University sited in mainland China is encouraging students to communicate in English and other foreign languages outside of the formal classroom environment. It seems unnatural for them since most students would naturally communicate in Mandarin. Therefore, we designed the transmedia approach to not only have an explicit goal – the explication of an important grammar point – but also to develop their self-study, creative and language skills towards achieving this goal. The literary, lexical, grammatical and creative skills that developed as students designed products, commented on them and peer-to-peer corrected them did not revolve simply around the passé compose and imparfait and was not conducted solely in French. We found that the transmedia approach to educational discovery promoted interdisciplinary participation as students used English and French to communicate with others outside their subject area. For instance, International Communication students used their second language, English, to discuss with their French tutor and Chinese Information Technology staff how best to create a computer game to teach a French grammar point. Student comments posted on the blog in both French and English demonstrate that the transmedia products have not only succeeded in explaining one aspect of French grammar but have also provoked authentic target language use. For example, in response to the first video Clair wrote: ‘Cette vidéo est utile pour comprendre le point langue. Hier, je la regardais mais la musique de fond était dolente. Ma colocataire est revenue et elle a dit que la vidéo est amusante’ (this video is helpful to understand the language point. Yesterday I watched it but the background music was mournful. My roommate returned and said that the video is fun). In response to the comedy video broadcast on NUTS, Nadia wrote: ‘Quand tu m’as montré cette vidéo, je ne pouvais pas arrêter de rire car je viens de rencontrer cet étudiant taiwanais dans l’ascenseur avant-hier. Donc à partir d’aujourd’hui, chaque fois que je vais le voir, je vais avoir l’image de lui, assis sur la siège des toilettes dans ma tête.’ (When you showed me this video, I could not stop laughing because I just met this Taiwanese student in the elevator the day before yesterday. So from now on, whenever I meet him, I’ll have the image of him sitting on the toilet seat in my head). The computer game provoked Ray to offer some constructive criticism in English: ‘Before criticizing the game, we have to affirm that it is a good try which combine the grammars with video game. However, there are still a few bugs. I the books should disappear after we touch them: If we just want to get a higher mark, we do not need to enter the next stage; just stay in first stage, touch the book again and again. Tired? Have a cup of coffee, and then continue. U will be the king of the game. 2. the increase of competition: if we can upload the marks to compete with other students, it will be more interesting. 3. we can have a gift such as a picture of beauty with hot body in the end of the game. It will attract more students. Good luck to the next game’. And in response to the digitized cartoon strip that uses the Chinese wolves and sheep narrative, Shilo wrote: ‘Absolument à voir ! histoire éternelle, les moutons et les loups…Lanyangyang est toujours gourmand’ (This is a must-see. Eternal story of sheep and wolves ... Lanyangyang is always hungry). These comments and others like them will be used to edit the media products in stage 2 of the project.

One rather ironic issue that arose is linked with the obstacle we met when trying to publish one of our videos on iTunesU. When we attempted this we were asked to confirm we owned the copyright or have permission for all materials used in our recording, including images in the background. We are actually still waiting to know whether we need permission for the background image of a LEGO brick in one of our videos. This problem
demonstrates the paradox of adopting the open source ethos embodied in informal participatory cultures and trying to apply it within an institution bound by legal issues of ownership. Nonetheless, this can be a useful educational exercise for students who need to learn to navigate legal and ethical issues of copyright law.

**Conclusion**

We are able to underline the willingness of our students to become media creators and active participants inside our project despite the fact that this is a non-assessed course. Students created the comedy video to explain the second grammar point, the computer game to explain the third, the animated comic to explain the fourth, and will remix the songs in the 5th project to produce their own karaoke versions. Other students commented on the transmedia products on the blog and used the target grammar to write example sentences. Through the creative process itself and the participatory culture generated, students are benefitting from exposure to and use of functional English and French, while developing creative, analytical, technological and ethical competencies.

We have noticed that this project has moved students away from the notion that they perform best as passive learners in teacher-centered lectures and seminars, but they have yet to become truly autonomous learners. Instead, we can say that the transmedia project is helping them to transition towards becoming more independent, but they still expect tutor input to direct them to this goal. The tutors asked them to volunteer to create the media products and then guided them through the process. The tutors asked the other students to post comments on the blog. The tutors told the students that they can use pseudonyms for these comments and that their comments be polite and constructive. In a sense, the students have moved from being teacher-centered passive learners to being teacher-directed active learners. This conforms to Jenkin’s (2007) notion that within informal learning cultures novices develop through the guidance of mentors. However, the mentors need not be university tutors.

Two further projects being prepared will focus on Japanese learning and advanced academic English. The mentors for these projects will be the students who created the media products in the French project. The tutors will host the respective blogs and provide guidance when requested, and it is expected that more learner autonomy will ensue.

We believe that transmedia education can be a useful complement to traditional university learning and that it can be stepped up to encompass other subjects. For example, international politics and history lessons in which counterfactual universes are created; or ethics lessons where alternate moral choices may lead to unintended consequences; and one can imagine projects where engineering, legal and medical issues are analyzed by students through a series of media products with real case histories being revealed in each one. After all, if the entertainment industry recognizes that exploiting these new participatory cultures can increase profits by hooking active consumers, then clearly universities and schools can follow the same approach to engage active learners.

**References**


Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere thanks to our colleagues and students that collaborated to this project. In particular to Wang Yan and Jin Su to create the NUTS video, to Hongji Li for creating the computer game and to Guiqian Yitao and Jian Shen for their comic. Our special thanks to Sunny Qi and Michael Zhang from the UNNC IT-Services for their continuing support.