Experiencing Van Gogh's Heritage: A Case Study

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1. INTRODUCTION

In view of Vincent Van Gogh's 125th death anniversary in 2015, the Regional council West Brabant and the city of Breda with its surroundings commissioned our university the drafting of a tourism development plan for the Dutch region of West Brabant using Van Gogh as a brand image. Van Gogh the artist is mostly associated to Amsterdam, where the museum named after him and collecting most of his work is located. Or to France, where he spent the last years of his life, part of which hospitalised in a psychiatric institution, and where he eventually took his own life in Auvers-sur-Oise in 1890. But few know that Van Gogh was born in Zundert, a small village in West Brabant, and spent his early life from child till young adulthood in various places in Brabant.

We developed a narrative concept for a tourist's experience that discloses the man behind the artist, with his struggles, his strengths and weaknesses, his failures and successes. The concept offers a frame to better understand his art by embedding it into the life he lived in Brabant, what he felt and experienced till his mid-twenties.

We hope that, by raising this interest in Vincent's formation years, tourists will become curious and willing to spend more time in Brabant than they do now.

2. DESIGN APPROACH

In order to define how a tourist's experience revealing Van Gogh the man should look like, we started with investigating the notion of culture tourism. This led us to consider different tourist typologies and in particular 3 types of cultural tourists: the *culture vultures*, the *cultural sightseers* and the *incidental tourists* (Culture24 2013). They approach culture in a different way and with

different expectations, and look for a different cultural experience and, in the case of the incidental tourists; they even do not purposefully look for one.

Next to this, we interviewed the current involved stakeholders, that is representatives of the three municipalities in West Brabant (i.e. Zundert, Etten-Leur, Breda), which have some heritage related to Van Gogh and his family. The aim of this was to make an inventory of what exists in terms of cultural heritage, to list the present and planned initiatives to celebrate the painter in those locations in 2015 and to verify what the municipalities' expectations and wishes are in the longer term about using Van Gogh as a brand image.

3. BECOMING VINCENT

In the creative phase, we first developed an overarching concept: *Becoming Vincent*.

The concept in itself has two layers. Firstly, it aims at telling the backstory of how Vincent became the person and the artist who is so well known from his French period, which we label as 'Being Vincent'. Secondly, the concept allows the tourist to identify fully with Vincent, and therefore to 'become Vincent' during their experience at the above mentioned locations. For the narrative elaboration of the concept, we compared Van Gogh's life to a universal storytelling model consisting of twelve steps (Bouma 2010) that mirrors the 'hero's journey' (Campbell 1945/1990, Vogler 2007), a structure that can be recognized in many great myths, tales and legends. It is striking to see how Vincent's life completely matches the twelve steps, in terms of challenges, crises and resolution. The universal characteristics of Vincent's story will appeal to tourists from any cultural background. Experiencing a certain step of Vincent's life in one place will encourage the tourist to want to know

more about the rest of the story, either at that location or at another location. For his birthplace Zundert for instance, we suggest to create the experience around Vincent's early childhood: what was it like to live as a Protestant son of a parson in a Catholic community? What did it feel like for young Vincent to visit his brother's grave every year on his birthday? (Vincent was born one year to date after the first Vincent of the family was still-born. The Vincent we know was a replacement child to a certain extent. The church where the father preached and the grave of the still-born baby are still present in Zundert) Storytelling will make the experience of his birthplace meaningful (Hover 2013). Moreover, this concept foresees a three-layered structure (see in next section) so as to appeal differently and specifically to each of the three tourist typologies mentioned earlier.

Finally, by using storytelling, the three municipalities in West Brabant can be connected to each other (narratively, physically and virtually) as well as to all other locations where Vincent's life later took place. This opens up new perspectives to experience Van Gogh's heritage as a whole and to live a unique tourist's experience.

4. INTERACTIVE AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Although the process so far has only been concerned with the concept and not with the form this concept can potentially take, we are convinced that by integrating a digital component into the concept a narrative link between the different locations can be created and with that the three locations will, individually as well as complementarily, contribute to the 'Becoming Vincent' experience in Brabant, in the Netherlands and possibly in the whole of Europe. By merging the physical local elements with some digital or virtual ones, through an AR app, for example, through installations or tangible interactions, location-based elements can be enriched and *augmented*; tourists can be encouraged to become more active participants and even co-creators of their own experience as the way in which they live their own 'Becoming Vincent'. They can also connect through various social media and build a community of Van Gogh's followers who create and share (new) content.

Playful interaction with tangible interfaces has the potential to lower the access threshold of this otherwise rather specialised content. The digital visualisation of information allows for a personalised experience whereby stories and content can be adapted to each individual's interests and motivation, so the tourist's profile, both thematically as well as visually.

We believe that through this form of engagement we can expect a process of levelling up of the tourists themselves: the causal tourist may become a cultural sightseer, and the cultural sightseer a culture vulture. For instance, in Zundert, casual tourists can be stimulated to want to learn more about other phases and events of Vincent's life, at other locations or digitally; cultural sightseers, to whom the backstory about the replacement child syndrome is addressed, can become interested in the family ties of 19th century Holland, a layer deeper.

5. CONCLUSION

This project has shown us the potential of combining on site and digital storytelling to improve the tourist's experience of a place into a more engaging and personalised encounter.

Only a next stage in this project however will allow us to investigate effectively how digital innovation can improve this tourist's experience, to identify the most promising and appropriate design solutions, and to test them out with real tourists.

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