INTERPRETIVE EVALUATION AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE
The Lessons from the Journey to the Beginnings Project

Zsuzsa Berecz – Árpád Bőczén

As heritage managers and interpretation experts, we increasingly have the opportunity to contribute to projects focusing on showcasing heritage values and audience development. Thereby, our work involves most of the time collaborative learning about the possible role of interpretation in presenting cultural heritage. Notably, not all presentations are necessarily interpretive too, and the task of heritage interpreters is not only to present archaeological heritage to audiences in comprehensible and exciting ways. Helping to establish a bond between heritage and the people is among our most important missions, thus preserving heritage. However, we also have to 'value' heritage, not simply 'evaluate', or 'assess'. As unusual as the interpretive practice seems in the Hungarian heritage scene, the more necessary it is. Why? This is what we are trying to highlight in regard to a particular project.

Archaeologists can make a significant impact on culture by discovering lost phenomena and related meanings or creating new meanings in connection to specific sites. Inherently, their work may disrupt the already established ways of engagement people had towards heritage; this may rejuvenate existing connections, confront others and create new ones. Problems arise when one faces the following questions regarding cultural phenomena in connection to particular places: by whom and how far are local phenomena considered significant? Who should care for them and why? In other words: whose heritage are we talking about? This is when the role of interpretation comes into the picture, which can be best described in the following way: there is a need for designing a communication process, which creates meaningful links between the people and the given place, and there is also a need for interactions, which influence what we hold valuable about places, how we appreciate these values and what we do with them. The most important tool to influence such connections is interpretation, the success of which lies in providing first-hand experience, while also enabling individuals to live through different types and qualities of experiences. Its function and message is not about presenting a large amount of data, but rather the essence of the place, conveyed in a focused and coherent way. At the same time, the interpretive message can and should be relevant (both comprehensible and interesting) to its target audiences, in a way that a communication channel opens, through which past and present realities meet and collide. This latter we find important, as providing clues – or referential points – for individual and collective identities is central to the concept of heritage. Based on this, one should underline that interpretation is much more than experiential presentation. It has a mission – just like heritage sites do. Interpretive evaluation is partly about the investigation into how far this mission is fulfilled. On the other hand, it is instrumental for getting to know the potential 'heirs.' In order to appropriately consider them in relation to any particular place, one has to value them, to know who they are, why they come to visit, and what experiences they would bring home.

THE 'JOURNEY TO THE BEGINNINGS' PROJECT

The 'Journey to the Beginnings' project (journeytothebeginnings.eu – henceforth: JTTB) was an international cooperation, running between the autumn of 2018 and February 2020, funded by the 'Creative Europe' program of the European Commission. As stated in the proposal, the main goal of the project was to promote sustainable, art-based heritage tourism at four sites along the Danube, presenting prehistoric archaeological cultures (Gârla-Mare, Lepenski Vir, Vučedol, Vatya) and archaeological research through contemporary art and modern technologies. An important aim was also the targeting of young audiences, to promote archaeological sites with the help of digital technologies, in context of a joint narrative, while

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Fig. 1. In the first stage of the adventure game the visitor [i.e. the time traveller wearing VR goggles] meets a Bronze Age Vatya woman (Photo: Viktória Szekér)

creating also best practices for a multidisciplinary collaboration.

As an outcome of the project, the collaborating specialists – individuals and organizations – envisaged a prehistoric theatre-adventure game, designed also for digital mobile platforms (*Fig. 1*). The development of the game required the contribution of a range of specialists. The project was hosted and managed by the cultural organization Pro Progressione. The archaeological sites were represented by staff members of the *"Matrica" Museum and Archaeological Park* in Százhalombatta, Hungary, the *Arheoloski Muzej Lepenski Vir* in Serbia, the *Muzej vučedolske kulture* in Croatia and the *Muzeul Regiunii Porţilor de Fier* in Romania. Artistic director of the project was Máté Czakó theatre director, the script-writer was Balázs Zágoni, writer, the digital game designer was Árpád Bayer, historian and game designer. They collaborated with the Croatian company Novena, responsible for developing digital technologies, and with Joana Sofaer from the University of Southhampton, as well as with Zsuzsa Berecz and Árpád Bőczén from KÖME – Association of Cultural Heritage Managers (in Hungarian: *Kulturális Örökség Menedzserek Egyesülete*) –, who were acting as operative leaders and heritage-interpretation specialists (*Fig. 2*).

Like many international collaborations, the JTTB project started from a situation where participants have not – or only barely – known one another, and basically had no previous experience in working together. Representatives of different professional fields needed to find a common language and create a joint product. Thus, the task was both product development and experimental cooperation, where the process was just as important as the final product. For us, members of KÖME, this experience was of special significance, as we had an opportunity to follow through the complex collaboration of the participants, who all had different motivations, needs and mindsets, whereby we could facilitate the collaboration by implementing various communication methods (internal and external) according to the different goals and directions.

In case of such projects, preparing evaluations during the final phase would have been the usual practice. However, we deemed it important to monitor the work in progress and gather feedback in order to guarantee the success of the teamwork. In the literature, evaluation phases are basically described as preliminary (*front-end*), interim (*formative*) and final (*summative*). Preliminary assessments are usually concerned about the needs and expectations (of the participants) and synchronizing them with project goals. Interim assessments can be compared to facilitating and coaching, tracing the progress, establishing and maintaining communication and fine tuning the tools and the goals. Summative assessments are, apparently, concerned about the final 'products' (exhibitions, digital applications, services), assessing their quality and success as well as drawing conclusions, taking into account how the 'product' fits into the portfolio of the respective institutions/companies. Thus, evaluation has a lot to do with the issue of sustainability.

The method of interpretive evaluation can be briefly summarized in the framework of the *why, what for whom* and *how* questions. In connection to the JTTB project, this translates into the following challenges:

Why – coordinating the <u>motivations</u> of the par-

Fig. 2. The major part of the project team following the introductory workshop in Lepenski Vir (Photo: Árpád Bőczén)

ticipants, clarifying the aims of the project in relation to the goals and missions of the participating archaeological sites;

What – harmonizing the products to be developed (theatre adventure game, digital game) with the various significance, characteristics, assets and potentials of the different sites;

For whom – targeting a common audience based on the different visitors of the particular sites;

How – selecting optimal methods and tools upon the clarification of the first three issues.

In case of the JTTB – as in many similar collaboration projects – planning was not implemented within this ideal framework (at once a chronological schedule), as the tools (live-action adventure game and its digital adaptation) had been already defined before the common basis and goals were set. Thus, the evaluations carried out by KÖME focused on harmonizing the viewpoints of the partners, on setting a common ground and – as much as possible – on optimizing the product to these goals. Following this strategy, we were able to define already at the beginning of the project what the outcomes should be: a theatre game with a common narrative, adapted to the four sites, as well as a digital game based on the live event, virtually connecting the four sites (*Fig. 3*). Thus, instead of a live-action theatre play and its mere digitalization (as stated in the original proposal), basically two different products were outlined. It also became clear during the peer-led discussions in the first stage of the project that the common goal is not to create a heritage-based artwork, but rather an art-based heritage service. In case of the former, the goal is esthetical, with an added educational element, whereas in the latter case, it is more focused on the actual heritage assets (and their interpretation) with a clear educational emphasis.

At this point, it has to be noted that in case of similar projects the local site managements mostly expect to have the attractions presented in experiential, entertaining and attractive ways, beyond dry scientific facts (*Fig. 4*), in order to make their visitors develop an affinity to certain historical periods or cultures. In our opinion, however, approaching the projects this way implies two problems. On the one hand, the potentials of interpretive practices are underestimated, as they can go far beyond developing an affinity to something. On the other hand, the outcomes of such projects are very difficult – if not impossible – to measure, as it is hard to tell whether the (real or imagined) positive feedback is due to visitors being entertained or there is indeed an educational experience.

Fig. 3. The theatre game – adopted to the four sites – is based on reasonably prehistoric activities, some elements of which are, however, not easily implemented in the digital application (Photo: Viktória Szekér)

Fig. 4. Experiencing working with clay, introduced by a Bronze Age Vatya woman

Fig. 5. Participants of the professional workshop have raised concerns and suggestions along concrete questions following group discussions

From among the different stages of interim (formative) evaluations in our project, we would highlight three elements. In October 2018, we organized public test-days to showcase the early (demo) version of the theatre adventure game. On one occasion, we invited MA students of the Cultural Heritage Studies Program at ELTE (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest), and on the next occasion we advertised the program for specialists involved in cultural heritage pedagogy. This latter event was also accompanied by a workshop for professionals (*Fig. 5*). At this relatively early stage of the project, we intended to collect feedback from the type of participants, with whom the theatre professionals coordinating the project would be otherwise less likely to meet – i.e. museum pedagogues. The concrete and multifaceted answers collected from them illuminated that artistic tools were in many points short-handed of authenticity, which would also be a relevant criterion, and that the adventure game was still not complex enough from a pedagogical point of view (*Fig. 6*).

At that point, we had two practical accomplishments (apart from the collection of feedbacks): we managed to get involved Árpád Bayer (Open History), a historian and game designer, who contributed to the subsequent stages of the project, and whose integrated knowledge and expertise concerning both entertainment and education was instrumental for our work. On the other hand, the feedbacks revealed that it was largely unclear what target groups the theatre game would be aimed at (young adults, primary school students, families etc.), so we felt that it would be useful to clarify this issue with the project partners before the game development stage begins. We distributed a questionnaire among the managers of the four museums, which considered the live theatre game and the digital game separately, thereby, instructing both designers and site managers to think of these as separate 'products'.

Fig. 6. Remarks by a working group following the workshop (Photo: Zsuzsa Berecz)

The third element of the evaluation process was a survey in form of interviews, carried out in connection to the premier of the theatre game at Százhalombatta in May 2019, with the participation of the actors and the script-writer. We were interested in finding out how the game is received by those who creatively contributed to it under the supervision of the art director but did not take part directly in the design process.

The lessons to be learned, underlining the challenges involved in collaborative works connecting different professions and disciplines:

Networking – One of the priorities of JTTB was the networking of different archaeological sites. The idea of a 'common narrative' was intended to promote this, however, it became clear during the pro-

Fig. 7. The cover story connecting the sites is about an archaeology professor – time traveller –, who lost his tablet in the past. The players of the game are to retrieve this object and take it to the right place in order to re-establish the order of the universe. This cover story allowed for showcasing not only the Bronze Age environments and objects (reproductions), but also digital tools (Photo: Viktória Szekér)
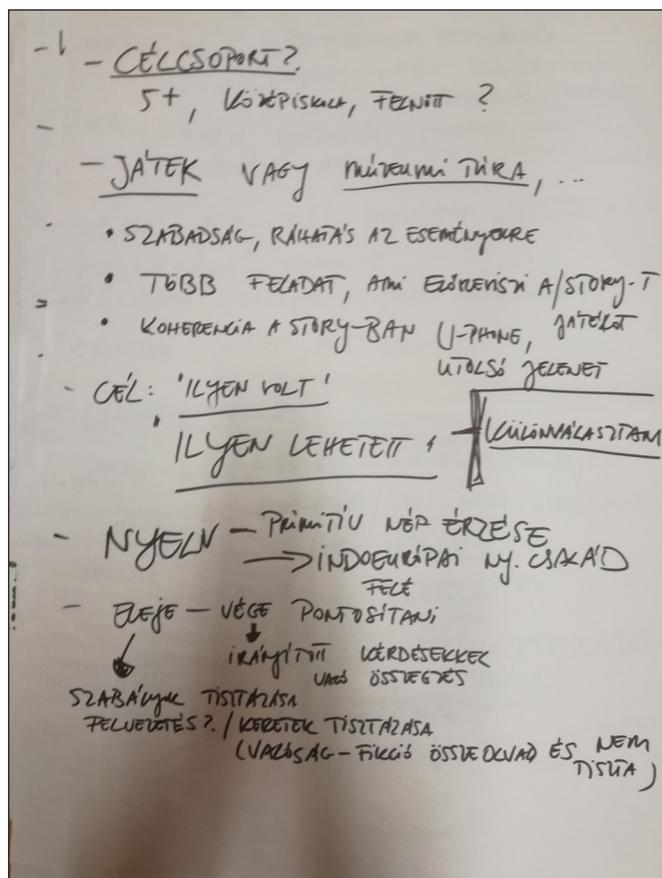
ject that developing such a narrative raises interpretive and practical issues (*Fig. 7*). Thematic networks can be very important regarding the sustainable management of institutions, as it can open new opportunities for funding – beyond the basic subsidies covering management costs –, for targeting new audiences, as well as for creating new tourist attractions. However, the institutions should be determined to take an active role in realizing these goals. It is therefore important to dedicate the necessary amount of time for consultations among them. Although this seemingly diverts attention from product development, the advantages are manifest, since the better the institutions know one another, the more opportunities they will be able to identify for collaborations.

Sustainability – This concept is much overused, yet, in such cooperative projects it is particularly important to agree on what it actually means for the participants. Apparently, art-groups or museums may have different views on sustainability. For artists, sustainability concerns less the 'product', but rather the continuing opportunity to work and network with people (which is predominantly of immaterial nature). The museums on the other side are apparently interested in maintaining and operating the newly introduced services for as long as possible. Theatre is, however, a costly art form, and digital tools may wear out quickly. Institutions forming similar partnerships would be advised to consider how they will be able to maintain new services created in partnership by relying on their own budget. In our case, a possible option – which emerged already during the project – was the idea of an educational program (which could be also developed jointly) in order to involve local inhabitants to keep the theatre adventure game running.

Authenticity – Authenticity, as a criterion, was a recurring issue during the project, as it was often perceived by the contributing artists as an obstacle. Our interviews underlined that various fictional ideas had to be dismissed as "one could not make sure of whether they really existed in a prehistoric cultural context." The conflict between the different concepts of authenticity – of archaeology and of art – is well illustrated by the fact that the Százhalombatta archaeologist, who played the archaeologist in the demo version of the game, was substituted by an actor in the final version. As Balázs Zágoni, the script writer summed up the situation: the artistic leader "decided on having an actor play the archaeologist since the archaeologist could not act surprised

Fig. 8. Snapshot from the final version, where an actor plays the role of the archaeologist (Photo: Viktória Szekér)

[when meeting the time travellers, i.e. the audience]. Now, however, the situation is that the actor is not able to perform convincingly that he is an archaeologist" (*Fig. 8*).

During this one-and-a-half-year long journey, the greatest challenge we witnessed was the 'stepping out of the comfort zone', which applied for everyone involved. In order to create a platform to realize the common goals of the project and to introduce a common language, different viewpoints and work methods should have been synchronized. Interpretive evaluations by a third party could forward or even provoke these consultations. Using tried-and-tested methods, it was possible to collect feedbacks from the participants and visitors (by way of questionnaires, focus-group discussions, visitor studies). Due to its holistic methodology, interpretive evaluation can contribute to avoiding the stall of a project achieving only as much as 'a first common step'. Evaluation can help project participants in considering consciously their goals and opportunities already from the beginning.

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE (IN ENGLISH)

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