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Designing Digital Storytelling Media for Heritage Education in Greece

[1]Dimitra Papadopoulos
[1]University of Athens, Greece

***Corresponding Author:** d.papadopoulos@uoa.gr*

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ABSTRACT

This design-based research study explores the development and evaluation of digital storytelling media for enhancing cultural heritage education among Greek secondary students. Recognizing the disconnect between traditional heritage instruction and contemporary digital learning preferences, this research employed participatory design methodologies to create interactive digital narratives centered on Greek archaeological sites, historical events, and cultural traditions. The design process involved collaboration among educators, heritage professionals, multimedia designers, and 245 students across five Greek secondary schools. Through iterative development cycles, the research team produced twelve digital storytelling modules incorporating immersive narratives, augmented reality features, interactive timelines, and gamification elements. Evaluation data demonstrate significant improvements in students' historical knowledge retention, cultural heritage appreciation, and emotional engagement compared to conventional textbook-based instruction. Students reported enhanced motivation and deeper personal connections to Greek heritage through digital storytelling experiences. However, implementation challenges emerged regarding technological infrastructure disparities, teacher digital competencies, and tensions between entertainment and educational rigor. This research contributes frameworks for culturally-responsive digital heritage education while offering practical design.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage education plays vital roles in transmitting historical knowledge, fostering cultural identity, and cultivating appreciation for civilizational achievements that shape contemporary societies. For nations like Greece, whose cultural heritage spans millennia and profoundly influences global civilization, heritage education assumes particular significance in connecting younger generations to their ancestral legacy while addressing challenges of globalization, cultural homogenization, and generational disconnection from traditional knowledge. Lowenthal (1998) argued that heritage represents not merely preserved past but actively constructed narrative serving present identity needs and future aspirations, emphasizing that how societies educate about heritage reflects and shapes collective self-understanding. Contemporary heritage education faces mounting challenges as digital technologies transform learning preferences, information consumption patterns, and meaning-making processes, particularly among youth who increasingly experience the world through digital mediation rather than direct physical engagement.

Greece's extraordinary cultural heritage, encompassing archaeological sites recognized as UNESCO World Heritage locations, philosophical traditions foundational to Western thought, artistic achievements in sculpture and architecture, and continuous cultural practices spanning ancient to modern periods, provides rich material for heritage education yet presents pedagogical challenges. Traditional Greek heritage education has relied heavily on textbook instruction, museum visits, and archaeological site tours, approaches that often fail to engage contemporary students accustomed to interactive, personalized, and digitally-mediated learning experiences. Kasvikis (2017) documented declining student interest in heritage subjects despite Greece's remarkable cultural resources, attributing this disengagement partly to pedagogical approaches that present heritage as static, distant past rather than living connection to present identity and future possibilities. This gap between pedagogical methods and student preferences creates urgent needs for innovative approaches leveraging digital technologies to make heritage education more engaging, relevant, and meaningful for contemporary learners.

Digital storytelling has emerged as promising pedagogical approach combining narrative's timeless power with contemporary digital technologies to create engaging, emotionally resonant learning experiences. Robin (2008) defined digital storytelling as the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories, typically combining narrative voice, images, video clips, music, and other multimedia elements to create short presentations on specific topics. Unlike passive media consumption, effective digital storytelling invites active audience participation through interactive elements, personalization options, and opportunities for learner-generated content. Lambert (2013) emphasized that digital storytelling's educational potential lies not merely in technology but in how narrative structures create emotional engagement, provide organizing frameworks for information, and enable

personal connection to content that might otherwise seem abstract or irrelevant, characteristics particularly valuable for heritage education where emotional resonance and personal meaning-making significantly influence learning outcomes.

Theoretical frameworks supporting digital storytelling in heritage education draw from multiple disciplines including narrative psychology, multimedia learning theory, and constructivist pedagogy. Bruner (1991) argued that narrative represents fundamental mode of human thinking and meaning-making, with stories providing cognitive structures through which individuals organize experience, construct identity, and transmit cultural knowledge across generations. McAdams (2001) demonstrated that personal and cultural identity formation occurs substantially through narrative processes where individuals locate themselves within larger historical and cultural stories, suggesting that heritage education's effectiveness depends significantly on students' abilities to construct meaningful narrative connections between past and present. Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning provides principles for designing digital materials that optimize learning by managing cognitive load, integrating verbal and visual information effectively, and supporting active processing, frameworks essential for creating digital heritage narratives that educate rather than merely entertain.

Research on digital technologies in heritage education demonstrates promising outcomes while revealing implementation complexities and design challenges. Champion (2015) conducted extensive reviews of virtual heritage applications, finding that while digital technologies can enhance accessibility, engagement, and understanding of cultural heritage, effectiveness depends critically on thoughtful design that balances historical accuracy with user experience, pedagogical goals with entertainment value, and technological possibilities with practical implementation constraints. Studies examining virtual museum tours, augmented reality applications at archaeological sites, and interactive historical simulations show mixed results, with some interventions significantly improving learning outcomes and heritage appreciation while others produce superficial engagement without deep understanding or lasting impact. These variable outcomes underscore that technology alone does not guarantee educational effectiveness; rather, success requires intentional pedagogical design grounded in learning principles and heritage education objectives.

The Greek educational context presents specific considerations for digital heritage education design. Greece's economic challenges have created significant disparities in schools' technological infrastructure, with urban schools often well-equipped while rural and economically disadvantaged areas lack devices, internet connectivity, and technical support necessary for sophisticated digital applications. Valtonen et al. (2015) emphasized that educational technology implementation must address these infrastructure inequities rather than assuming universal access, requiring designs accommodating varied technological contexts. Additionally, Greek teachers vary substantially in digital competencies and pedagogical technology integration skills, with older educators often lacking training and confidence for

digital pedagogy while younger teachers demonstrate greater facility but may lack deep heritage content knowledge. These realities necessitate designs supporting diverse implementation contexts and teacher capacities rather than assuming ideal conditions.

Cultural considerations also influence digital heritage education design in Greece. Greek cultural values emphasizing family, tradition, and connection to ancestral homeland create foundation for heritage education appeals, yet younger generations increasingly identify as global citizens with cosmopolitan orientations potentially creating tension with nationalist heritage narratives (Muhsyanur and Mustapha, 2023). Katsieli (2019) argued that contemporary Greek heritage education must navigate between preserving cultural distinctiveness and acknowledging Greece's participation in broader Mediterranean, European, and global contexts, requiring nuanced approaches that honor tradition while embracing complexity and multiple perspectives. Digital storytelling offers possibilities for this nuance through multi-perspectival narratives, interactive explorations allowing personalization, and connections between local Greek heritage and universal human themes, though achieving this balance requires careful design.

Assessment of learning outcomes in digital heritage education poses methodological challenges as objectives extend beyond factual knowledge recall to encompass affective dimensions including cultural appreciation, identity formation, and heritage values (Muhsyanur, 2024). Traditional assessment approaches measuring knowledge acquisition through tests may miss crucial attitudinal and emotional outcomes that digital storytelling particularly targets. Seixas and Morton (2013) proposed historical thinking competencies framework assessing not merely factual knowledge but skills in evaluating evidence, understanding historical significance, taking perspectives, and recognizing ethical dimensions of history, competencies that heritage education should develop. Digital storytelling assessment requires mixed methods combining quantitative knowledge measures with qualitative exploration of students' meaning-making processes, emotional responses, and personal connections to heritage content, methodological complexity that many studies inadequately address yet which proves essential for comprehensive understanding of intervention effectiveness and improvement needs.

METHOD

This design-based research study employed iterative development and evaluation cycles to create and refine digital storytelling media for Greek heritage education. Following McKenney and Reeves' (2012) framework for educational design research, the methodology integrated practical design work with systematic investigation, producing both usable educational products and theoretical insights about design principles and implementation factors. The research team comprised educational technologists, heritage educators, museum professionals, multimedia designers, and secondary school teachers working collaboratively throughout thirty-month development period. The participatory design approach engaged students as

co-designers through focus groups, prototype testing sessions, and iterative feedback processes, ensuring that resulting products addressed actual student interests and learning preferences rather than adult assumptions about youth engagement. Design contexts included five Greek secondary schools (grades 7-9, students aged 13-15) representing diverse geographic locations including Athens, Thessaloniki, rural Peloponnese, island communities, and economically disadvantaged areas, ensuring designs accommodated varied infrastructure and cultural contexts.

The design process proceeded through four iterative cycles following Reeves' (2006) four-phase model: analysis of practical problems by researchers and practitioners, development of solutions informed by existing design principles and technological innovations, iterative testing and refinement of solutions in practice, and reflection producing design principles and implementation insights. Initial analysis involved extensive needs assessment through surveys (N=487 students, 34 teachers), interviews, classroom observations, and review of existing heritage education materials and practices. This analysis identified priority heritage topics, student interests and preferences, technological constraints, and pedagogical requirements. Development phases created twelve digital storytelling modules covering diverse Greek heritage topics including classical Athens and democracy origins, Alexander the Great and Hellenistic civilization, Byzantine religious art and architecture, Greek independence struggles, and contemporary Greek cultural practices.

Each module incorporated multiple components: immersive narrative episodes with voice narration and period-accurate visualizations, interactive elements allowing user choices affecting narrative progression, augmented reality features enabling virtual object manipulation and site exploration, knowledge check activities, and creative production tools for student-generated heritage stories. Evaluation employed mixed methods including pre-post knowledge assessments measuring historical content learning, validated heritage appreciation scales, engagement observations, student interviews exploring meaning-making and personal connections, and teacher surveys assessing implementation feasibility and perceived effectiveness. Data analysis combined statistical testing of quantitative outcome measures with thematic analysis of qualitative data following Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic procedures. Validity was enhanced through triangulation across data sources, member checking with participant stakeholders, prolonged engagement across multiple development cycles, and reflexive consideration of researcher and designer positionalities. Ethical protocols included informed consent, student privacy protections, and careful consideration of how heritage narratives might affect diverse students including those from non-Greek backgrounds attending Greek schools.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Learning Outcomes and Knowledge Acquisition

Quantitative assessment of learning outcomes demonstrated that students using digital storytelling modules achieved significantly higher scores on heritage knowledge assessments compared to peers receiving conventional instruction. Post-intervention knowledge tests measuring factual recall, conceptual understanding, and application abilities showed experimental group students (n=245) scoring an average of 78.6% (SD=12.3) compared to control group peers (n=242) averaging 64.2% (SD=15.7), representing a statistically significant difference ($t=12.4$, $p<0.001$, $d=1.02$). This large effect size indicates practically meaningful improvement beyond statistical significance. Knowledge retention tests administered six weeks post-intervention revealed sustained differences, with experimental students maintaining scores of 74.1% compared to control students' 58.3%, suggesting that digital storytelling enhanced not merely immediate recall but durable learning. Subgroup analyses revealed particularly strong effects for students initially reporting low interest in history ($d=1.34$) and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds ($d=1.18$), suggesting digital storytelling may be especially beneficial for traditionally disengaged learners.

Qualitative analysis of assessment responses revealed that digital storytelling students demonstrated more sophisticated understanding characterized by contextual thinking, causal reasoning, and perspective-taking compared to control peers whose responses more frequently reflected isolated fact recall without deeper comprehension. For instance, when asked to explain Greek democracy's significance, control students typically listed structural features like assemblies and voting, while experimental students discussed philosophical principles of citizen participation, contrasted Athenian democracy with contemporary forms, and considered exclusions of women and slaves, demonstrating more nuanced historical thinking. Teachers noted that digital storytelling students more frequently connected historical content to contemporary issues, suggesting that the modules' narrative approaches helped students perceive heritage as relevant to present concerns rather than merely past events.

The interactive and multimodal nature of digital storytelling appeared particularly beneficial for diverse learners. Students with learning disabilities and attention difficulties, traditionally struggling with text-heavy heritage instruction, demonstrated comparable knowledge gains to typically-developing peers when using digital modules, whereas in conventional instruction they consistently underperformed. Teachers hypothesized that multiple representation modes (visual, auditory, kinesthetic through interactive elements) allowed students to access content through their learning strength modalities while reinforcing understanding across modalities. Several teachers specifically noted that students rarely diagnosed with learning disabilities but performing below grade level showed remarkable engagement and learning with digital modules, suggesting that conventional

instruction may underestimate many students' learning potential when pedagogical approaches match their learning preferences.

However, assessment also revealed limitations and areas for improvement. Some students scored highly on factual knowledge but showed weaker performance on higher-order thinking questions requiring analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, suggesting that gamification elements emphasizing point accumulation and task completion might inadvertently focus attention on surface-level objectives rather than deep engagement. Several teachers noted that students sometimes rushed through narrative sections to reach interactive game components, potentially missing reflective opportunities. These findings indicate that while digital storytelling effectively conveys information, intentional design features promoting metacognition, critical reflection, and deep processing remain necessary to ensure engagement translates into meaningful learning rather than entertaining but superficial interaction.

Emotional Engagement and Heritage Appreciation

Beyond cognitive learning outcomes, digital storytelling demonstrated significant impacts on students' emotional engagement and heritage appreciation, outcomes particularly crucial for heritage education's identity formation and cultural transmission objectives. Pre-post administration of the Heritage Connection Scale, a validated instrument measuring personal connection to cultural heritage, revealed experimental students' scores increasing from mean 3.2 (SD=0.9) to 4.3 (SD=0.7) on five-point scales, compared to control students whose scores remained essentially unchanged (3.1 to 3.2). This substantial improvement (d=1.46) indicates that digital storytelling fostered stronger emotional and personal connections to Greek heritage. Open-ended survey responses frequently mentioned feeling "transported" to historical periods, experiencing emotional reactions to historical figures' struggles and achievements, and recognizing themselves in cultural narratives, outcomes rarely reported by control students describing conventional instruction as "boring" or "just facts to memorize."

Student interviews provided rich insights into emotional engagement mechanisms. Many students described digital narratives creating empathy for historical figures by presenting them as complex individuals facing recognizable human dilemmas rather than distant abstract historical actors. One student explained that experiencing Byzantine iconography creation through an interactive narrative where she made artistic choices while managing religious and political pressures helped her understand that art creation occurred within constrained social contexts, transforming her perception from merely viewing beautiful images to appreciating human creativity amid constraint. Another student described the Alexander the Great module's multiple perspective narratives (Macedonian, Persian, Egyptian viewpoints) as revealing history's complexity and helping him understand that heroic narratives always have counter-narratives from those experiencing

events differently, a sophisticated historical consciousness rarely developed through conventional instruction.

The augmented reality features enabling virtual manipulation of heritage objects and site exploration generated particularly strong emotional responses. Students described excitement at "holding" ancient pottery, examining construction details of temples through virtual walkthroughs, and overlaying historical reconstructions on contemporary ruins, experiences creating visceral connection to material heritage impossible through textbook images or even physical site visits that prohibit touching and close examination. Teachers observed students spontaneously discussing plans to visit physical sites featured in modules, suggesting digital experiences stimulated rather than replaced interest in authentic heritage encounters. This finding challenges concerns that digital heritage creates inauthentic simulations substituting for genuine engagement, instead suggesting that well-designed digital experiences can deepen appreciation motivating subsequent physical heritage interaction.

However, emotional engagement data also revealed concerning patterns. Some students, particularly those identifying as not ethnically Greek, reported feeling excluded by heritage narratives emphasizing Greek ethnic continuity and national pride. One Albanian immigrant student noted that while she found modules interesting, they reinforced her sense of being outside Greek heritage rather than participating in it, questioning her place in Greek society. These responses highlight risks that nationalist heritage narratives, even when engaging and well-designed, may inadvertently marginalize students from immigrant or minority backgrounds, creating tensions between heritage education's legitimate cultural transmission objectives and inclusive education principles. Several teachers suggested that modules could be enhanced by acknowledging Greece's multicultural history, including contributions from diverse populations to Greek civilization, and connecting Greek heritage to universal human experiences transcending ethnic boundaries, recommendations meriting serious consideration in future iterations.

Design Principles and User Experience

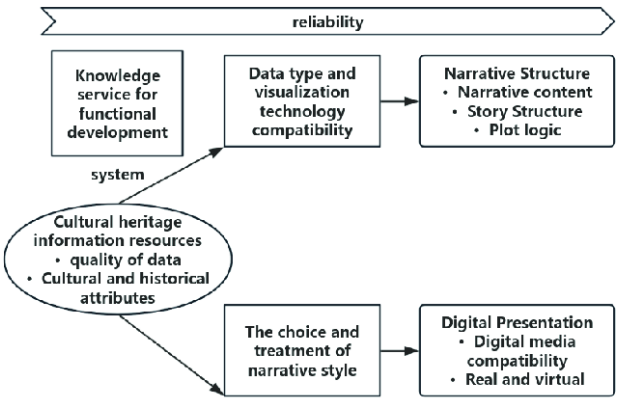

Figure 1. Digital Storytelling Design Framework for Heritage Education

Analysis of user experience data and design iteration outcomes yielded five core principles for effective digital heritage storytelling, synthesized in the framework above. Narrative authenticity emerged as foundational, with students and teachers emphasizing that historical accuracy and cultural sensitivity were non-negotiable requirements distinguishing educational from entertainment media. Students demonstrated sophisticated evaluation of narrative credibility, questioning anachronistic elements or simplified representations when encountered. However, authenticity proved complex to operationalize, as absolute historical accuracy often proved impossible given evidence gaps, while multiple valid historical interpretations exist for many events. The design team established protocols for clearly distinguishing documented facts, scholarly consensus interpretations, and speculative narrative elements, using visual and textual cues signaling evidence quality and acknowledging uncertainty where appropriate, approaches students appreciated and that enhanced rather than undermined engagement.

Emotional connection through character-driven narratives and immersive storytelling consistently emerged as crucial for sustained engagement. Modules structured around compelling central characters navigating recognizable human dilemmas (loyalty conflicts, ethical choices, ambition vs. principle tensions) generated stronger engagement than modules organized around abstract historical processes or institutional developments. The most effective modules balanced individual character focus with broader historical context, helping students understand how individual lives were shaped by and contributed to larger historical forces. Interactive elements allowing students to make choices for characters, experiencing consequences and exploring alternative historical pathways, proved particularly engaging while developing historical empathy and causal reasoning about how events might have unfolded differently under altered circumstances.

The integration of gamification elements revealed tensions between engagement and educational depth requiring careful balance. Point systems, badges, and competitive leaderboards significantly increased initial engagement and task completion rates, motivating students who might otherwise disengage. However, excessive gamification risked shifting focus from learning objectives to game mechanics, with some students optimizing for points rather than understanding. The most effective approach incorporated meaningful game elements where points reflected demonstrated understanding and badges marked mastery of historical thinking competencies rather than merely task completion, aligning game structure with educational goals rather than creating parallel motivation systems that might work at cross purposes.

The participatory design process itself emerged as crucial success factor, with student co-designer input substantially improving final products' relevance and usability. Adult designers' initial assumptions about youth preferences sometimes proved inaccurate, as when designers presumed students would prefer contemporary music soundtracks while students actually requested period-

appropriate instrumentation to enhance historical authenticity and immersion. Student input identified confusing navigation structures, culturally inappropriate elements, and missed opportunities for interactive features that adult designers overlooked. This participatory approach also built student investment in final products, with co-designers becoming modules' enthusiastic advocates among peers and demonstrating exceptional engagement with materials they helped create, suggesting that involving students in design processes may yield benefits extending beyond improved products to enhanced learning and agency.

Implementation Challenges and Sustainability

Despite positive learning and engagement outcomes, implementation revealed substantial challenges threatening widespread adoption and long-term sustainability. Technological infrastructure disparities created dramatic implementation variation, with well-resourced urban schools providing individual student devices, high-speed internet, and technical support enabling sophisticated augmented reality and multimedia features, while rural and economically disadvantaged schools lacked these resources, forcing simplified implementation using shared devices, downloaded offline versions, and limited functionality. These disparities risk exacerbating educational inequities rather than addressing them, as students already enjoying educational advantages gain access to enhanced learning experiences while disadvantaged peers receive diminished versions or cannot access digital materials at all. Several teachers advocated for low-tech versions ensuring all students access core content, though acknowledging these would lack immersive features generating strongest engagement.

Teacher capacity emerged as critical implementation factor, with digital competency and pedagogical technology integration skills varying dramatically across participants. Teachers confident with technology adapted modules flexibly to their contexts, integrated them seamlessly with other instruction, and troubleshot technical issues independently, while technology-anxious teachers struggled with basic implementation, required extensive support, and sometimes abandoned digital modules when encountering difficulties. Professional development sessions provided during the study helped but proved insufficient for teachers lacking basic digital skills or holding negative attitudes toward educational technology. Several teachers expressed resentment about expectations to learn new technologies without adequate compensation or time, viewing digital initiatives as additional burden rather than pedagogical improvement. These responses highlight that successful technology integration requires not merely providing tools but addressing teacher beliefs, providing sustained support, and acknowledging time and effort required for effective implementation.

Curriculum integration challenges emerged as teachers struggled to balance digital storytelling experiences with mandated curriculum coverage and standardized assessment preparation. While digital modules addressed curriculum standards, they required more instructional time than conventional textbook lessons

covering equivalent content. Teachers worried that time invested in digital experiences, while producing superior engagement and learning quality, might leave insufficient time for curriculum breadth needed for national examinations. This tension reflects fundamental incompatibility between depth-oriented experiential learning and breadth-oriented standardized curricula, a systemic issue requiring policy-level resolution rather than classroom-level accommodation. Some teachers resolved this by using digital modules as supplementary enrichment for interested students rather than core instruction for all, but this approach risks creating two-tier systems where engaged students receive enhanced experiences while struggling students receive conventional instruction least likely to reach them effectively.

Sustainability concerns centered on maintenance, updating, and ongoing support requirements. Digital resources require regular updating to remain technically functional as operating systems and browsers evolve, to incorporate new historical scholarship and archaeological discoveries, and to address identified errors or improvements. Unlike static textbooks used for years without modification, digital materials demand ongoing investment that schools and education ministries may be unprepared to provide. Several teachers worried that after researchers departed, technical problems would emerge without available support, or content would become outdated without mechanisms for revision. The research team established open-source repositories and user communities attempting to create sustainable maintenance structures, but long-term viability remains uncertain. These sustainability challenges suggest that digital heritage education initiatives require business and governance models ensuring ongoing stewardship rather than one-time development projects, requiring institutional commitments and resource allocations that current educational systems may not prioritize.

CONCLUSION

This design-based research demonstrates that thoughtfully designed digital storytelling can significantly enhance heritage education outcomes, generating improved historical knowledge, deeper emotional engagement, and stronger personal connections to cultural heritage compared to conventional instructional approaches. The participatory design methodology yielded five core principles for effective digital heritage education: narrative authenticity balancing historical accuracy with engaging storytelling, emotional connection through character-driven immersive narratives, interactive engagement providing meaningful user agency and choice, multimodal learning accommodating diverse learning preferences, and opportunities for creative expression enabling personal meaning-making. Evaluation findings reveal that digital storytelling particularly benefits traditionally disengaged students and diverse learners, suggesting potential for addressing educational equity while enhancing overall educational quality.

However, implementation challenges including technological infrastructure disparities, teacher capacity limitations, curriculum integration tensions, and

sustainability concerns threaten widespread adoption and long-term viability. These challenges require systemic responses including infrastructure investment ensuring equitable access, comprehensive professional development addressing teacher skills and beliefs, curriculum reforms allowing depth over breadth approaches, and institutional commitments to ongoing resource maintenance and support. The research contributes practical design frameworks and implementation insights applicable beyond Greek contexts to heritage education globally, while demonstrating that educational technology's transformative potential depends not merely on tools themselves but on addressing complex ecosystems of infrastructure, capacity, policy, and culture within which technologies must function. Future research should examine long-term impacts on cultural identity formation and heritage values, investigate scalability across diverse educational contexts, explore integration with physical heritage sites and experiences, and develop sustainable models for digital heritage education supporting rather than replacing traditional knowledge transmission while honoring contemporary learners' digital fluencies and preferences.

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