Re: Dakar Arts Festival - exploring transmedia storytelling methods to document an Internet scam

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Abstract. With the 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival' project we present an alternative way to raise awareness about online advance-fee fraud scams, by exploring the extent to which concepts of transmedia storytelling are adaptable in representing a scambait - the practice of scamming a scammer. By investigating practices of scammers we can question the trust that is put into online representations. Yet, what happens when transmedia concepts are adapted to documentation material and blended with fictional characters? With the help of an example, we illustrate how a documented scambait evolved into a transmedia story, unfolding over several media channels.

Keywords: Transmedia Storytelling, Online representations, 419 scam.

1 Introduction

Boosted by Internet technologies, scammers increasingly seek out to reach victims through fraudulent online representations and mass e-mails. We all receive proposals, either in our inbox or spam filter, that in fact are attempts to scam a victim. Most of us delete the spams and have a critical eye for offers seemingly 'too good to be true', yet scamming is a big industry that many victims fall for [2]. Scams come in various forms, some quite unbelievable, others smartly entwined in our daily practices. If we take a closer look into our spam filters, a number of scam stories reveal to be quite creative and intriguing story worlds. The 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival' project documents the practice of scammers, who announce an online open call for a fake art festival in Dakar, Senegal. We received the call for the first time in 2010 and a first version of the artwork was presented in 2011. At an early stage we recognized that the project as well as the scam would evolve over time. This poster paper summarizes some key aspects of the artwork and how it changed since its first version functioning as an addition to the paper that was published in connection with the launch of the artwork [5]. The festival is just a lead story for advance-fee fraud and victims are lured into wiring money for reservations, transportation costs, commissions or other

service charges without knowing that the festival does not exist. 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival' consists of two parts, an interactive installation and online in form of websites and on various social media channels.

2   Challenges and Design Choices

The main challenge of the project is to retell a documentation of a scam in an interesting way such that it invites various levels of involvement from the audience. The mix of real life and fictional elements in the story world also leads to interesting discussions on design ethics.

2.1   Interactive Installation

The suitcase consists of various elements: video trailer introducing the story, an interactive audio-timeline reproducing selected parts of the email correspondence, various printed documents taken out of the email correspondence with the scammers, including: invitations, money transfer forms, hotel and flight reservations, a map of Dakar with important locations combined with a fact sheet about Senegal and Heidis art postcards and Peters business cards that visitors can collect and use as entrance points to further investigate the story online.
In the case of 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival', when the story unfolds over the various channels in a non-linear fashion and with several possible entrance points, it is not possible to introduce elements chronologically, though each channel like a blog or each mode like the audio timeline in the suitcase can have a linear time perspective. Thus when designing the story, we emphasized on Jenkins' idea of 'Spreadability vs. Drillability' [3], meaning that viewers should be able to scan the story, decide if it is interesting for them, as well as drill or dig deeper into it when the story captures their imagination.
The story in the suitcase is open ended; it partly continues online and partly overlaps. The online stories take a more personal point of view by reflecting more on reactions and feelings that Heidi, Peter and Toni have in relation to the correspondence with the scammers instead of repeating it.

2.2   Online

The story unfolds online through a number of social media platforms. The canonic narrations that transmedia storytelling affords can be used to give insight into various perspectives of the same issue. The website dakarartsfestival.net facilitates the audience in the process of assembling the puzzle, by presenting the characters of the story and leading visitors to investigate their social media profiles. All the fragments of the online story assemble into the second main entrance point of the story. This takes place when a potential victim receives an email from the scammers and uses online search engines to find more about the festival. The presented search hits include the characters social media profiles and the dakarartsfestival.net site, subsequently making the online search

a main entrance point to the story.

Many artists who received the email invitation and searched online for the festival came across the websites. The responses were very different; some interested artists wrote an email to us and the scammers asking about the actual date of the opening reception, since there were divergent dates on our website and the ongoing open calls that the scammers were sending out. Others tried to warn our galerist 'Peter Irrthum' not to cooperate with the festival, since there exists a group on Facebook warning about the festival being an art scam. Several websites like embassies in Dakar or the Dak'art Biennale [1] published alert messages about the scam format linking to our website for further details, helping us to inform about the fake art festival and introduce the story to a broader audience.

2.3   Scam the scammer kit

The Scam the Scammer kit is an extension of the 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival' story for those in the audience willing to become actively involved. This continues the documentation of the the 'Dakar Arts Festival' scammers' practices. By introducing the ethical guidelines in the kit we want the users to question their motives and methods of scambaiting before entering scambaiting communities. The kit can be seen as a facilitative tool for a potential activist, who is working to raise awareness about cyber crimes. In the scope of the project the kit was conceptualized.

We continued to work on the kit and developed it further into a '419-fiction toolkit' and a series of workshops. The workshops give a theoretical and practical introduction to interactive narratives in 419-fictional environments where participants can take the first steps of creating their fictional characters and infiltrating a scammers story-world to observe and interrupt their workflow.

3   Further developments

In 2011 the 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival' art project was created as a response to the circulating scam. Since then we had several opportunities to present our work in different setups and implement the feedback from the visitors. As a result of overlapping exhibitions at different festivals, we created a second version of the suitcase and accordingly made improvements in both versions. We added QR-tags to the map in the suitcase presenting video footage of various sites in Dakar, providing more background information about the city and its inhabitants. We created posters showing the 'anatomy diagram of the scam' giving an instant overview of the content that could be further explored in the installation. This extension of the installation works as a preamble transferring the visitor to the world of cybercrime. Over the time the scam method also evolved and it is still possible to find open calls for the fake art festival:

DAKAR International Festival of Visual Art (I.C.V ARTS) took place at the Daniel Sorano center. Dakar Visual art will happen all year round in Dakar for

four weeks every year from September 2013. I.C.V.ARTS DAKAR-2013, the International Festival of Visual Arts, under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Senegal, is an international art event dedicated to visual arts and bringing together various events around, African artists and professionals of contemporary art from all continents. [...] For more information for your participation [...] write Mr. Sow at festival_arts@yahoo.fr.

In 2010 we observed a slightly different open call published by the scammers; the name was changed to 'DAKAR International Festival of Visual Art (I.C.V ARTS)'. An addition to the open call is the reference to the 'Daniel Sorano' center as an exhibition venue, this adds credibility to the storyline. The main contact person is 'Mr. Sow' instead of 'Mariama Sy'. After contacting him to get more informations about the festival, he replied and portrayed himself as a sculptor who lived for several years abroad and returned back to Senegal to help the development of the local art scene. He also referred to his website ousmane-sow.com. When contacting 'Ousmane Sow' over his website [4], he refuses to be involved in the organization of the festival. It became clear to us that he became a victim of identity theft and that the scammers use his name and credibility to lure other victims to fall for the scam.

4   Conclusions

While corresponding with the scammers we figured out that the online representations for our virtual characters highly increased their trustworthiness and therefore gave us more possibilities to investigate and document the scammers' practices. Concepts of transmedia storytelling were used to unfold multi layered stories providing a method to spread details of the story over various channels. Both entrance points - the installation and the story online - arose awareness about the scam and therefore the 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival' project meet its purpose of documenting a scam. Side by side the scam evolves as well showing the importance of documentation-oriented scambaiting. Our experience with this project also motivated us to further develop the 'scam the scammer kit' and test its potentials in a series of workshops.

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