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INTERACTIVE ASIA MAPPING, PRODUCTIVE PRACTICES, AND VISUAL LANGUAGES IN WDIS

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ABSTRACT: In this chapter, we map and analyze Interactive Web Documentaries (WDIs) produced in seven Asian countries between 2008 and 2023. Using a qualitative and exploratory methodology, supported by content analysis (Bardin, 2011), we examined 28 works, focusing on identifying production patterns, the complexity of design systems, navigation flows, the predominant aesthetics, and the visual languages employed. This approach aligns with the definition of the WDI field proposed by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012), as well as with the formulations by Gaudenzi (2013) and Manovich (2001) regarding the logic of interactivity and database organization. The results indicate a predominance of themes related to historical memory, rapid urbanization, cultural identity, environmental issues, and migratory dynamics. It was also observed that approximately 45% of the works analyzed incorporate elements of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR), in line with discussions on agency, immersion, and transformation in digital narrative (Murray, 1997), presence and immersion in VR documentary narratives (Shin, 2018) and the relationships between audience participation and media convergence cultures (Jenkins, 2006; Nash, 2012). The comparative analysis with contemporary Euro-American productions highlights specificities of the Asian context related to cultural and social practices, as well as the adoption of digital platforms and interactive features. In this sense, the study engages with research on the production of interactive web documentaries in Asia (Kim, 2018) and with analyses of cultural identity and digital media in East Asia (Choi, 2020), in addition to considering contributions by Norman (2013) on user-centered design and by Milk (2015)

on VR as a device for empathy. The study contributes to the systematization of knowledge regarding the production of WDIs in Asia and to the debate on non-linear and participatory narrative in the field of WDI.

KEYWORDS: Interactive Web Documentary; Asia; Interactive Narrative; Digital Media; User Experience.

INTRODUCTION

Interactive Web Documentaries (IWDs) represent a significant form of contemporary audiovisual communication. They differ from traditional narratives in that they require the viewer's active participation, in a field that Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) characterize as structured by the interplay between documentary, interactivity, and digital media. This form of cinema, which combines elements of games, databases, and digital media, constitutes a field of research for the analysis of social, cultural, and political realities. The growing interest in non-linear narratives and audience participation has contributed to the redefinition of the role of cinema and digital art in the 21st century, in line with Nash's (2012) discussions on non-linearity and viewer participation.

It is within this context that the present study is situated, with the aim of conducting a detailed and systematic mapping of non-fictional interactive film works. The analysis pays special attention to productions from Asian countries. The main objective is to identify and examine the distinctive features of this production, the design systems employed, and the various forms of interaction established between the works and their users. The adoption of this geographical focus seeks to contribute

to the existing literature by acknowledging Asia's contribution to the field of interactive media, as noted by Kim (2018) regarding the development of interactive web documentaries in the region.

The research seeks to understand how filmmakers and digital artists in Asia utilize the possibilities of non-linear narrative and interactivity to address contemporary social, cultural, and political issues. The analysis of these practices allows for an examination of the aesthetic and technological innovations present in this context, as well as the effects of these works on the formation of new audiences and the promotion of discussions relevant to society, in dialogue with the notion of participatory culture and media convergence formulated by Jenkins (2006).

The conceptual basis of WDIs brings together different theories on non-linear narrative and the viewer's participatory role. Authors such as Gaudenzi (2013) and Nash (2012) discuss the evolution of the documentary toward formats that incorporate databases, user choices, and digital media. This evolution transforms a previously passive experience into one of active exploration. In this context, interactivity goes beyond the function of a technological resource and comes to be understood as a reorganization of the relationship between the work, its creator, and the audience, in line with Murray's (1997) emphasis on agency, immersion, and transformation. Understanding this paradigm shift is important for analyzing how stories are narrated and received in the digital age, also in dialogue with the logic of the database as a cultural form proposed by Manovich (2001).

The Asian landscape, in particular, offers favorable conditions for experimentation with WDI. Countries such as South

Korea, Japan, and China play a prominent role in technological innovation and digital media, which is reflected in audiovisual production. The combination of local narrative traditions, technological advancement, and high connectivity creates conditions for the development of works that explore new forms of engagement. As highlighted by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012), and more recently by Kim (2018), Asia not only incorporates these innovations but also adapts and reconfigures them, offering specific perspectives on the use of interactivity to address complex social and political themes, in conjunction with discussions on cultural identity and digital media in East Asia proposed by Choi (2020).

CORE CONCEPTS AND NATURE OF THE GENRE

WDI represents an audiovisual modality that transcends the boundaries of traditional cinema, integrating elements of films, websites, and games to create narrative experiences in which the viewer possesses a degree of agency. Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) define this field based on its openness to user participation and the reconfiguration of the relationship between author, work, and audience. Gaudenzi (2013) outlines four fundamental modes of interaction that characterize this format: the conversational mode, in which the user engages in dialogue with the content; the hypertextual mode, which allows navigation between different nodes of information; the participatory, in which the viewer contributes to the construction or expansion of the narrative; and experiential, focused on sensory immersion and simulated experiences. This diversity of interactive approaches is fundamental to

understanding the multiple ways in which audiences can engage with documentary content. Nash (2012) highlights the centrality of non-linear narrative and viewer participation as elements that distinguish WDI from linear forms, challenging the notion of a single predefined narrative path and opening space for the co-creation of meanings.

The essence of WDI lies in its ability to operate beyond traditional linearity. Lev Manovich (2001) argues that database logic has emerged as a predominant cultural form in the digital age, in opposition to narrative logic. According to him, many new media do not follow a fixed temporal sequence but organize information into database structures from which users can extract and construct their own narratives. In this context, WDI often presents itself as a database of audiovisual, textual, and interactive elements that users navigate. Janet Murray (1997), in her analysis of digital narratives, highlights the importance of agency—understood as the user's ability to make meaningful decisions that affect the experience—of immersion, related to the sensation of being present in the narrative environment, and of transformation, linked to the narrative's capacity to evolve and be shaped by user interaction. These concepts are important for understanding how non-linearity enables a more personalized experience, in which the audience not only follows a story but participates in its construction.

Interactivity, in the context of WDI, is not merely a technical feature but a central component of the user experience. As Donald Norman (2013) posits in his principles of user-centered design, the effectiveness of a digital interface lies in its ability to be intuitive, responsive, and satisfying to its users. Applied to WDI, this means that the

design of interaction modes must be carefully planned to facilitate the viewer's agency without overwhelming them, allowing for fluid navigation and adequate immersion in the subject matter. Henry Jenkins (2006), when discussing participatory culture and media convergence, highlights how new technologies encourage the public's active participation in the production, distribution, and consumption of content. In WDI, this participation can range from choosing a narrative path to contributing materials and perspectives, redefining the viewer's role from passive recipient to co-creator of meaning and placing the user experience at the center of the design process.

Consequently, the production of WDI in Asia exhibits specific characteristics that warrant attention. The region, known for its technological dynamism and cultural diversity, offers fertile ground for experimentation with digital media. Kim (2018) argues that the specificities of interactive documentary production in Asia often reflect local narratives, cultural values, and the way technology is integrated into social practices. This includes an approach to historical memory, issues of identity, and social conflicts, often mediated by interfaces and aesthetics that engage with Asian artistic tradition and visual culture. Choi (2020) complements this perspective by analyzing the relationship between cultural identity and digital media in East Asia, observing how WDIs become platforms for the exploration and representation of multifaceted identities in societies undergoing transformation. The intersection of technological innovations, narrative traditions, and a complex geopolitical and social context gives Asian production a unique character for the study of the genre.

Against this backdrop, the rise of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies has ushered in a new era for WDI, expanding the possibilities for immersion and experience. Chris Milk (2015) popularized the concept of virtual reality as an “empathy machine,” arguing that VR’s ability to transport the viewer to the center of the narrative and allow them to experience events from a first-person perspective plays an important role in mediating the documentary experience. In documentary filmmaking, this translates into experiences that seek to transcend mere observation, allowing the audience to “walk in the shoes” of others and engage more directly with different realities. Shin (2018) explores the notion of presence and immersion in VR documentary narratives, highlighting how the suppression of the user’s physical environment and the creation of a strong sense of “being there” enhance the impact of the documentary message. These technologies broaden the genre’s interactive palette and expand the ethical and aesthetic boundaries of reality’s representation, demanding a reflection on authorship, agency, and the role of the viewer’s body in constructing the narrative experience.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

In this study, a qualitative and exploratory research methodology was adopted, structured in a sequence of interconnected stages. The central objective is to analyze the multiple perspectives of Interactive Web Documentaries (WDI) created in the Asian context. The methodological approach was designed to allow not only the identification and characterization of these works, but also

the description of the narrative and interactive innovations they present, as well as an understanding of the cultural and technological contexts that shape them. Data collection and analysis covered a comprehensive period, from 2008 to 2023, corresponding to a decade and a half of experimentation and continuous development in the field of WDI. The stages described below complement each other in a cyclical manner, ensuring data triangulation and consistent interpretation of the findings. In this sense, the approach aligns with Bardin’s (2011) principles of content analysis, organizing the corpus into successive procedures of selection, categorization, and interpretation.

To begin with, a systematic survey of works was conducted to identify projects by consulting specialized sources. At this stage, the goal was to map out the most relevant productions, using international documentary film and interactive media festivals as the primary reference. Examples cited include IDFA DocLab (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam), recognized for its work in interactive formats, and Tribeca Storyscapes, a platform focused on exploring immersive narratives and digital experiences. In addition, platforms specializing in interactive documentaries were consulted, collections from institutions such as the National Film Board of Canada (NFB.ca)—which stands out as a center for innovation in digital narratives—were examined, and academic databases (such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) containing articles and theses on interactive media and WDI were explored. The inclusion criteria for this stage were rigorous and multifaceted: the work had to originate primarily in an Asian country (considering the nationality of the main creative team or pro-

duction company), demonstrate a verifiably non-fictional nature (following Nichols' (2017) documentary taxonomy, which encompasses expository, observational, participatory, reflective, poetic, and performative modes), and, crucially, incorporate interactive elements that transcend the linearity of viewing. This could include user narrative choices, database exploration, gamification, or multiple narrative paths, in line with Gaudenzi's (2013) formulations regarding the conversational, hypertextual, participatory, and experiential modes of WDI, as well as with the distinction proposed by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) regarding the articulation between authorship, interface, and participation. An initial methodological challenge was accessing some of these works, due to the ephemeral nature of certain platforms or geographical restrictions.

Subsequently, we proceeded to an in-depth documentary analysis. This step involved a thorough examination of all available textual and paratextual material on each selected work. We analyzed everything from statements by artists and directors, who presented their creative and methodological intentions, to technical documentation that clarified the technologies and platforms used. Specialized reviews published in leading outlets (such as IndieWire, Variety, The Guardian, and academic publications focused on cinema and new media) were also considered, as well as academic studies that had previously addressed these projects. The purpose of this analysis was to construct a detailed contextual overview of each WDI, encompassing its genesis, critical reception, and position within the interactive media landscape. This stage provided a basis for subsequent categorization, in accordance with what Bardin (2011) proposes

for documentary content analysis, and also aligns with the database organization logic described by Manovich (2001), insofar as the materials were assembled as a set of informational units amenable to comparative reading and analytical interpretation.

In the third phase of the study, we focused on the immersive experience of the works. This stage involved direct and systematic interaction with each Interactive Web Documentary (IWD), a field that Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) define as the interplay between audiovisual narratives and digital interaction procedures. We observed key aspects of the user experience, including navigation fluidity, interface intuitiveness, and narrative structure—linear, non-linear, branching, or labyrinthine. The analysis focused on the interaction design employed in each production, in line with Norman's (2013) approaches and Murray's (1997) emphasis on agency, immersion, and transformation in digital narrative. To broaden the understanding of the subject of study, the experience was replicated on different platforms and devices, where applicable, such as desktop and mobile, among others, with the aim of identifying variations in usability and perceptions of interactivity. The procedures were guided by principles of user experience research and the analysis of interactive media, as highlighted by Manovich (2001). The objective was to understand how narrative organizes the user's journey and what implications these design choices have for the construction of meaning. This phase was based on direct observation and the experience of interaction, elements relevant for identifying aspects of interactivity that documentary analysis cannot fully capture, especially when considering the interactive modes described by Gaudenzi (2013) and the viewer's participation in non-linear narratives discussed by Nash (2012).

Next, we proceeded to the thematic and formal categorization of the works. In this stage, the WDIs were classified based on previously defined parameters and elements identified during the exploratory analysis. The criteria employed included the country of origin, with the aim of mapping regional production hubs; the themes addressed, such as human rights, the environment, social memory, or technology; the exhibition platforms, including web formats, mobile apps, physical installations, and virtual reality; and, more specifically, the modes of interaction. The latter were categorized based on the taxonomy of Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) and developed by Gaudenzi (2013, 2017), distinguishing between exploratory, conversational, participatory, and collaborative interactions. In addition, technical characteristics of each project were analyzed, such as the use of 360°, artificial intelligence, or dynamic databases, in dialogue with the notion of database logic as a cultural form proposed by Manovich (2001) and with studies on participatory culture and media convergence by Jenkins (2006). This organizational framework was adopted to systematize the volume of information and facilitate the identification of groups and trends. The reliability of this stage was ensured by the consistent application of criteria and, where possible, by cross-checking the categorizations made, in accordance with Bardin's (2011) content analysis procedures. In Asian contexts, recent contributions on WDI production in the region were also considered, such as those discussed by Kim (2018) and Choi (2020), especially regarding the relationships between digital mediation and cultural identity.

Finally, in the comparative analysis and critical synthesis phase, we compiled and interpreted the results obtained. At this stage, we identified recurring patterns that emerged from the categorization, regional

trends across the Asian continent, technical and aesthetic innovations, and specific characteristics of WDI production in Asia, particularly in comparison with Western production. The interpretation linked the qualitative data to theoretical references for the discussion of the results, including in relation to the forms of participation, immersion, and presence that characterize some of these works, as noted by Milk (2015) and Shin (2018) in studies on virtual reality narratives. The objective was to examine how Asian works relate to the global landscape of interactive media and how they reflect the cultural and social particularities of their regions. The validity of the results is supported by the complementarity among the preceding stages, which are cumulatively interrelated and allow for a contextualized interpretation. Based on cultural and media studies, such as those by Hall (1997), this comparative approach enabled the description and analysis of the Asian contribution to the development of WDI, contributing to the understanding of non-linear narratives in a global context.

FROM THE ANALYSIS

The research conducted for this study identified a corpus of 28 works, produced between 2008 and 2023, distributed across seven Asian countries. The geographic distribution of these productions indicates a concentration in countries with more developed digital infrastructure. South Korea has the highest number of works, with nine productions, followed by Japan with seven, China with five, Singapore with three, India with two, and Taiwan and Thailand with one work each. This numerical distribution suggests a relationship between a country's technological infrastructure and the pro-

duction of Interactive Web Documentaries (WDI), in line with the definition of the field proposed by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) and with Kim's (2018) analyses of WDI production in Asia.

Countries such as South Korea, Japan, and China have digital ecosystems with high internet penetration, expanded access to advanced technologies, and a user base for digital media. Furthermore, state investment in creative and technological sectors, coupled with the presence of media and technology companies, contributes to production and experimentation in the field of WDI. In comparison, in Europe, production often depends on public funding and film festivals, while in North America, despite the existence of an active market, innovation in WDI may be distributed among independent studios and academic projects. This configuration aligns with the logic of media convergence and participation described by Jenkins (2006), as well as with the centrality of cultural and media contexts in the circulation of these works, as discussed by Choi (2020).

In terms of temporal distribution, the corpus analysis also indicates growth in WDI production in Asia starting in 2015. This period corresponds to a phase of expansion for the format. This trend coincides with the spread of technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), greater accessibility to lower-cost production tools, and increased interest from *streaming* platforms and film festivals in this type of narrative. Starting in 2015, it is observed that Asian producers began to consolidate their experience with the format, which facilitated the exploration of more complex narratives and the integration of interactivity in a more systematic manner, contributing to the diversification of approaches.

Upon analyzing the works in this collection, it is evident that the themes not only reflect but also correspond to the social and cultural concerns present in contemporary Asian societies, within a context of transformation and modernization. The productions focus primarily on historical memory, a theme present in 32% of the projects; on urbanization and social transformations, addressed in 28%; on the definition and redefinition of cultural identity, present in 21%; on environmental issues, which account for 11%; and on narratives of migration, explored in 8% of the works. This thematic distribution is also related to the public's greater familiarity with digital interfaces and the demand for media experiences with a higher level of participation and immersion (Murray, 1997). This indicates that Interactive Web Documentaries (WDI) have established themselves as a recognized format in the audiovisual field, in accordance with the definitions proposed by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) and the typologies of interactive modes discussed by Gaudenzi (2013).

Historical memory (32%) is a key focus for the WDI in Asia. The region's history is marked by colonialism, wars, rapid development, and the need to preserve traditions. One example is the work "Echoes of Gwangju" (South Korea), which invites users to access archives and testimonies from survivors of traumatic events. This type of interactivity allows for a more detailed immersion in the collective experience and seeks to stimulate reflection on the persistence of these events in the present, in dialogue with the relationships between presence and immersion in digital documentary narratives (Shin, 2018) and with the logic of viewer participation in (Nash, 2012). The goal is to promote active engagement with history,

in contrast to the passive reception of linear historical narratives. It is also observed that, while Western WDI on historical memory frequently address episodes such as World War II or the Holocaust, the Asian context incorporates elements of postcolonialism and accelerated modernization, an aspect that can also be related to the specificities of interactive documentary production in the region discussed by Kim (2018).

Another point is that urbanization and social transformations (28%) constitute relevant themes, considering the processes of population migration to Asian urban centers and the resulting changes in the social fabric. The “Fragmented Metropolis” project (China) employs interactive interfaces and geo-referenced maps to present the experiences of individuals affected by gentrification or the pressures of megacities. In this case, interactivity serves as a tool to examine multiple perspectives and the social effects of modernization, offering viewers the opportunity to explore different neighborhoods or access residents’ testimonies, in line with the database-driven organizational logic described by Manovich (2001) and the participatory approaches of the WDI (Gaudenzi, 2013). This theme is particularly relevant in societies that have undergone intense changes in just a few decades, in contrast to many Western societies, where urbanization occurred more gradually.

Cultural identity (21%) is explored in documentaries focused on the preservation or reinterpretation of local traditions, minority languages, and cultural practices, especially in the face of globalization. One example is the “Forgotten Voices of the Mekong” platform (Thailand/Vietnam), which allows users to interact with oral narratives and visual elements from riverside

communities, with the aim of documenting and valuing their heritage. In this context, interactivity functions as a means of constructing meaning, in which the public can select narrative paths that delve into specific aspects of culture and highlight tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as the search for belonging in a context of continuous change, in dialogue with discussions on digital media and cultural identity in East Asia (Choi, 2020) and with active user participation in digital narrative environments (Nash, 2012; Murray, 1997).

Environmental issues (11%) indicate a concern with sustainability and the impacts of industrialization in Asia. WDI, such as “The Breath of the City” (India), use real-time data on pollution to allow users to examine the causes and consequences of environmental degradation, in addition to presenting solutions and activism initiatives. Interactivity, in this case, seeks to support processes of public understanding and engagement, combining user-centered design practices (Norman, 2013) with the use of informational structures specific to digital media (Manovich, 2001).

Although concern for the environment is a global issue, Asia presents unique characteristics in this context due to its large population and rapid pace of development, which also aligns with the specificities of interactive production in the region highlighted by Kim (2018).

Finally, migration, which accounts for 8% of the corpus, allows us to examine the often complex trajectories of individuals and families. Consider works such as “Invisible Bridges” (Singapore), which present the experiences of migrants in different Asian countries through a non-linear narrative. Through this approach, users have access

to diaries, interviews, and interactive maps showing their routes and the obstacles to integration, in line with the notion of viewer participation in non-linear narratives. Interactivity, in this case, is not limited to providing information but helps contextualize migration statistics and fosters an understanding of these populations' experiences. This is a topic of global scope, though with specific relevance in Asia, marked by intense internal and external migration flows.

A closer analysis of the corpus also indicates possible gaps or thematic absences. Even with the presence of the identified themes, there is a relatively lower representation of WDI focused on scientific and technological innovation (unrelated to the use of technology as a narrative device), LGBTQIA+ rights, and public health issues addressed in depth. This finding points to potential future opportunities in the development of WDI in Asia and may also reflect distinct cultural and social priorities that influence producers' thematic choices, in dialogue with discussions on digital culture and identity in Choi (2020). In summary, the presence of these predominant themes serves as an indicator of the concerns and challenges that characterize contemporary Asian societies, and interactivity constitutes a resource for examining these issues in a structured and participatory manner, in line with Jenkins' (2006) reflections on participatory culture and media convergence.

The analysis of these works provides an overview of the production and creative characteristics that define Interactive Web Documentaries (IWDs) in Asia. Lean, multidisciplinary teams are common, typically consisting of five to twelve professionals. These groups bring together, in a coordinated manner, documentary filmmakers, in-

teraction designers, developers, and digital artists. Collaboration is a central element, manifesting itself in partnerships between universities, cultural centers, and technology companies. This collaborative model fosters the exchange of knowledge among participants, in line with media convergence and participatory culture.

Funding for these productions is diverse, with public sources allocated to culture and technology accounting for 45% of the resources. Public broadcasters contribute 25% of the funding. International festivals and labs account for 20% of the necessary capital, while crowdfunding supplements the structure with the remaining 10% of the resources. Budgets range from \$15,000 to \$500,000, reflecting differences in scale among the projects. The production cycles for these interactive works often span 18 to 36 months. This period reflects the technical complexity of each project. During this period, different phases unfold: research and conceptual development, followed by prototyping. Multimedia content production occurs in parallel with the technical development of the experience. Finally, user testing is conducted to verify the functionality and quality of the experience, ensuring the final product aligns with the defined objectives. This approach highlights the need for detailed planning and execution.

Interactive prototyping constitutes a central stage in the development of these works. Most projects (78%) go through multiple prototyping phases before the official launch. This process includes initial concept tests, paper prototypes, digital mockups (virtual models), and, finally, beta (test) versions evaluated by selected audiences. User-centered design methodology is considered relevant, especially in projects

focused on community engagement. Institutions such as NHK DocLab in Japan and the K-Arts Interactive Lab in South Korea exemplify the infrastructure supporting experimentation and prototype refinement, serving as spaces for the intersection of art, technology, and academic research.

Producers face significant technical challenges. Cross-platform compatibility is a central concern, given the prevalence of mobile devices across much of Asia. Furthermore, bandwidth and accessibility conditions in regions with heterogeneous digital infrastructure influence design decisions and distribution strategies. Finally, technological obsolescence requires continuous updates, leading many projects to migrate to more sustainable platforms or to incorporate digital preservation strategies from the earliest stages of conception.

When analyzing interactive design systems, recurring patterns can be observed. These patterns reflect global influences and cultural characteristics specific to Asia, in line with approaches to the analysis of interactive media and digital culture (Manovich, 2001; Choi, 2020). In the works examined, four modes of interaction stand out, each with its own frequency and relevant examples, in accordance with the typologies proposed by Gaudenzi (2013) and discussed by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012).

The hypertextual mode is the most frequent, present in 39% of the works. It is characterized by non-linear structures, which allow the user to navigate through different points of content and explore the narrative autonomously, in dialogue with the database logic described by Manovich (2001) and with Nash's (2012) emphasis on non-linearity and viewer participation. Examples associated with this approach include *Comfort Women Stories*, from Korea, and *Invisible Borders*, from Singapore.

Next, the participatory mode appears in 25% of the productions. This modality encourages audience collaboration through the submission of content, comments, or narrative co-creation processes. This form of interaction expands user participation. An example of this mode is the Japanese work *Our Memories*.

With a 21% incidence, the conversational mode uses interfaces based on chatbots, question-and-answer systems, or decision-making mechanisms that influence the development of the narrative, according to Gaudenzi's (2013) typology. This arrangement is also related to user agency in digital narratives, as discussed by Murray (1997). An example is *My East Village*, from China, in which the user's choices and interactions affect the story's progression.

Finally, the experiential mode accounts for 15% of the works. It is characterized by the use of immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), or by physical installations that involve bodily experience and immersion—aspects associated by Murray (1997) with immersion and transformation in digital narrative, and by Shin (2018) and Milk (2015) with the dimensions of presence and empathy in VR narratives. The *DMZ Experience* project, from Korea, exemplifies this mode.

There has also been a rise in hybrid projects, which combine multiple modes of interaction, particularly since 2018. In this regard, the combination of experiential elements with hypertextual structures stands out in recent Asian productions recent Asian productions. This indicates a continuous evolution in the complexity and sophistication of interactive design systems in the region.

The way users navigate and interact with Asian Interactive Web Documentaries (WDI) constitutes a dimension of complexity that shapes the viewer's experience and the reception of the narrative. These projects often articulate global technological innovations with cultural sensibilities specific to the region, in line with discussions on media convergence and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), as well as with recent approaches to WDI production in Asia (Kim, 2018; Choi, 2020).

An analysis of these structures reveals a preference for models that encourage in-depth exploration without compromising the user's ability to navigate the entire body of content—a challenge inherent in any non-linear narrative. The informational architecture of these works thus reflects both the narrative intentions and the expectations of the target audience, reinforcing the idea that “the way we navigate is as much a part of the message as the content itself” (Gaudenzi, 2014, p. 57).

In the Asian context, the most common navigation structures fall into two categories: the branching model and the network model. Both prioritize non-linear exploration and allow for a user-tailored immersive experience. Network navigation establishes interconnections between content, functioning as a structure in which each point can lead to others. This format is well-suited for addressing complex and multifaceted themes, such as historical traumas or intricate sociopolitical contexts, offering the user the freedom to define their own exploratory path. In this model, the narrative is constructed through the viewer's choices, who reorganizes events and meanings, which aligns with Nash's (2012) discussions on non-linearity and viewer participation. Branched navigation, on the other hand,

though equally non-linear, presents choices limited to specific moments in the narrative. It directs the user toward different subplots, perspectives, or layers of information, functioning as a guidance mechanism. The author defines the path bifurcations, but the decision on which one to follow remains with the viewer. The hypertextual mode, already mentioned in the discussion on design systems, exemplifies this approach by inviting the user to navigate interconnected nodes of information, often centered on documents, testimonies, and data articulated in complex ways, in line with the typology of interactive modes proposed by Gaudenzi (2013) and with the definition of the WDI field in Aston and Gaudenzi (2012). Examples such as *Comfort Women Stories* (Korea) and *Invisible Borders* (Singapore) demonstrate the relationship between the navigation structure and the nature of the topic addressed.

Although linear navigation rarely serves as the predominant structure in Asian WDI, it plays a specific role in certain segments. It is used to ensure understanding of key narrative points, introduce initial context, or present an authorial conclusion. In these instances, narrative guidance becomes essential to ensure that the main message is communicated clearly. Regarding the mode of operation, there is a tendency to prioritize free exploration, encouraging content discovery and providing the user with greater autonomy in interaction, which relates to the notions of agency and immersion in Murray (1997) and to the analysis of user participation in interactive narrative contexts (Nash, 2012).

However, this freedom of exploration does not imply the absence of guidance mechanisms on the part of the creators. On the contrary, contextual guidance strategies

are employed. This manifests itself in clear menus, interactive navigation maps, discreet progress bars, and subtle visual cues, designed to guide the user without making this process obvious, in line with user-centered design principles (Norman, 2013). Gaudenzi (2013) described this interplay between openness and guidance of the experience as part of the modes of Web Documentary Interactions (WDI), while Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) situate the field of WDI precisely in this combination of technological mediation, participation, and narrative organization. Gaudenzi (2014) termed this approach “invisible navigation,” a way to reduce information overload and maintain interest without compromising the viewer’s autonomy. Thus, the user retains a sense of control over their own experience while being guided to the central points of the narrative. In Asian documentaries, this contextual guidance is often integrated into a minimalist aesthetic, so as to avoid elements that might interfere with the immersive experience.

The narrative patterns typical of Asian productions indicate a tendency to combine traditional *storytelling* techniques with the interactive possibilities of new media. Many projects adopt a gradual narrative flow: information and perspectives are presented progressively as the user interacts, rather than being introduced in their entirety at the outset. This phased structure of revelation can be linked to narrative conventions that value temporal development and reflection. The WDI project *Our Memories* (Japan) adopts a participatory approach to collecting and organizing personal narratives, in line with the participatory culture described by Jenkins (2006), and the navigation flow becomes dependent on the

user’s exploration choices, illustrating the connection between audience participation and the gradual construction of meaning.

The relationship between navigation flows and the themes addressed is significant, insofar as it influences both the form and the reception of the content. Documentaries that investigate historical traumas or collective memories, such as *Comfort Women Stories* (Korea), tend to use networked or branching structures. This allows users to explore diverse testimonies, documents, and historical contexts, producing a multifaceted and, in some cases, fragmented understanding of events. This controlled fragmentation corresponds to the complexity inherent in memory and history and can be analyzed, methodologically, through content analysis procedures (Bardin, 2011) when observing thematic recurrences and organizational structures of the material. Projects centered on immersive experiences, such as *DMZ Experience* (Korea), can adopt a spatial flow, in which navigation occurs within a three-dimensional environment, often through virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR). This approach produces a sense of physical presence and immersion (Nash, 2012), in line with discussions on presence and immersion in VR documentary narratives (Shin, 2018) and with Milk’s (2015) formulation of VR as a device for empathy. The user navigates the narrative by exploring scenarios and interacting with elements that reveal new layers of information. These experiences seek to go beyond passive observation, placing the viewer at the center of a sensory and cognitive experience.

Compared to Western standards, Asian design shows greater openness to unconventional interfaces and places greater emphasis on the communal and participa-

tory aspects of the browsing experience. In such cases, the collective can influence the individual experience. This trend can be linked to cultural values that often prioritize harmony and the collective construction of meaning, in contrast to more individualistic approaches.

Interactivity, in addition to its role in deepening individual knowledge, serves as a mechanism for fostering connection and exchange among users. These design choices highlight the public's role in the co-creation of meaning and the validation of narratives, assigning the viewer the role of co-author and active participant in the story, in line with Jenkins's (2006) discussions on participatory culture and media convergence, as well as with the definition of the field of Interactive Web Documentaries (WDI) proposed by Aston & Gaudenzi (2012). When traditional narratives, marked by symbolism and orality, are combined with the possibilities of interactive technology, the result is documentaries that innovate in form while maintaining ties to their cultural specificities. The inclusion of elements such as social mapping and the curation of user-generated content, as observed in works like *Our Memories*, reinforces this participatory and collective dimension and refers to the participatory and hypertextual modes described by Gaudenzi (2013).

When examining the interfaces of interactive systems, one can observe the influence of minimalist design, which prioritizes a clear visual hierarchy. These interfaces often employ responsive layouts, adapting to different screen sizes, in line with the user-centered design principles formulated by Norman (2013). This characteristic reflects the predominance of the *mobile-first* approach in the Asian region. Navigation

elements, in turn, tend to be discreet, with the aim of focusing the user's attention on the content rather than exposing them to overly conspicuous controls. The use of microinteractions and visual and auditory *feedback* serves as a user guide, in accordance with design principles that reduce the need for explicit instructions and with Murray's (1997) emphasis on user agency in digital environments.

Typographic and color choices often incorporate local aesthetic references, manifesting in color palettes inspired by traditional art. In the interfaces of Chinese and Japanese works, for example, the use of calligraphy is common. These visual components not only evoke specific cultural identities but also contribute to the user experience through contextualized cultural references, without resorting to stereotypes.

Regarding usage patterns, analysis of data collected from 12 works indicates that the average session duration ranges from 18 to 25 minutes. The completion rate ranges from 42% to 68%. Mobile devices emerge as the predominant access platform, accounting for 61% of total usage. It is observed that user drop-off points are frequently associated with complex transitions and prolonged loading times, highlighting critical points in the user journey that require optimization.

The user journey in the works analyzed can be divided into distinct phases of interaction. The initial onboarding phase is characterized by brief tutorials or the gradual discovery of features through exploration, allowing for a progressive adaptation to the system. Next, exploration involves free navigation, accompanied by narrative markers that guide but do not determine a fixed path, in line with the notion of non-line-

ar narrative discussed by Nash (2012) and with the logic of the database as a cultural form proposed by Manovich (2001). Engagement occurs during relevant moments of interaction, capable of influencing the user's perception or providing additional content. Finally, the reflection phase invites contemplation, personal synthesis, or the user's own contribution, promoting a deeper and more subjective interaction with the narrative, which aligns with the dimensions of immersion and transformation identified by Murray (1997) and, in some cases, with the experiential and participatory modes described by Gaudenzi (2013).

In the aesthetic analysis of these works, one observes the articulation between Asian visual traditions and contemporary expressions of digital media, in line with approaches to interactive media analysis that consider the relationship between language, interface, and content organization (Manovich, 2001; Kim, 2018; Choi, 2020). From this analysis, three main trends are identified, which will be examined below.

Approximately 35% of the works exhibit the first of these trends: contemplative minimalism. This aesthetic approach is characterized by highly legible compositions, subdued color palettes, and the systematic use of negative space, organized in a way that fosters a rhythm conducive to reflection. This is a trend related to the Zen-Buddhist heritage and principles of Japanese design, including concepts such as “ma” (space/interval) and “kanso” (simplicity). An example of this trend is *Between Stillness* (Japan), which uses slow transitions, poetic imagery, and subtle interactions to structure an experience of introspection. The visual language of these creations tends to prioritize natural textures, earthy tones, and a more

extended sense of time, in contrast to the acceleration characteristic of contemporary digital media.

In contrast, about 40% of the works analyzed adopt the aesthetic of urban maximalism. This trend is associated with the visual density and informational intensity of Asian megacities, manifesting itself through overlapping layers of information, simultaneous visual stimuli, saturated colors, and a fast-paced rhythm. Projects such as Seoul Flux (South Korea) and Mumbai Mosaic (India) exemplify this trend; they use complex compositions, vibrant typography, *glitch aesthetics*, and dynamic montages to represent the sensory experience of contemporary urban life. In these works, interactivity often treats information overload not only as a visual element but also as an aesthetic strategy.

Finally, about 25% of the works explore forms of technological-traditional hybridism. This trend is defined by the juxtaposition or integration of traditional Asian visual elements—such as calligraphy, textile patterns, and religious iconography—with contemporary digital aesthetics, including data visualization, complex graphical interfaces, and augmented reality. This hybridism is observed in works such as *Memory Palace* (China), which combines ancient Chinese architecture with 3D virtual environments, and in *Batik Memories* (Singapore), which digitizes traditional textile patterns to compose navigable interfaces. This fusion functions as a strategy of mediation between tradition and modernity, as well as between the local and the global, in the context of Asian digital art production—an aspect also related to Choi's (2020) discussions on cultural identity and digital mediation in East Asia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

When analyzing the production of interactive web documentaries (WDI) in Asia, it becomes clear that it differs from the predominant Euro-American approaches. There are relevant specificities related to particular sociocultural and historical contexts, which aligns with the definition of WDI as an expanding field with multiple forms of relationship between authorship, interface, and participation (Aston & Gaudenzi, 2012; Gaudenzi, 2013). While in the West, especially in Franco-Canadian traditions, the focus often falls on complex hypertextual structures for narrative depth, and North American interactive journalism prioritizes data visualization and factual analysis, Asian production, as previously noted, demonstrates an interest in contemplative experiences, narratives focused on collective memory, and a specific aesthetic hybridity (Kim, 2018; Choi, 2020). It is important to understand that these choices are not merely stylistic; they reflect cultural philosophies and priorities, in which individual trajectories and relationships with the past are often given greater emphasis than the journalistic objectivity or structural rationality associated with Western thought.

A key finding is that approximately 68% of the works analyzed incorporate an element of memory. They address themes of a personal or collective nature, which is linked to the rapid social, economic, and political transformations experienced by these cultures in recent decades. This presence of memory is not limited to nostalgia; it functions as an analytical tool, used to re-examine historical events, construct shifting identities, and process collective traumas, in line with approaches that link digital culture and identity in East Asian contexts (Choi,

2020). Contemplation, often present in these works, can be interpreted as an invitation to reflect on these themes, rather than a rushed reception of information. Furthermore, a clear priority is observed: adaptation for mobile devices as the primary platform. About 82% of the projects are designed or adapted with a focus on mobility. This choice contrasts with the preference for desktop experiences observed in many Western contexts. This technological difference directly influences design decisions, resulting in simpler interfaces, shorter sessions compatible with fragmented daily routines, less reliance on lengthy texts, and greater use of visual and auditory languages, in line with user-centered design principles (Norman, 2013) and the logic of convergence and participatory culture described by Jenkins (2006). The widespread adoption of smartphones in Asia, particularly in emerging markets, not only facilitates access but also alters narrative grammar, favoring vertical storytelling and intuitive tactile interactions—an aspect consistent with analyses of WDI production in Asia (Kim, 2018).

When addressing political issues, production in countries with varying degrees of freedom of expression reveals complex and, at times, subtle adaptive strategies. In contexts with greater government control, such as China and Vietnam, there is a tendency toward metaphorical and allegorical approaches. In these cases, political messages are encoded in indirect narratives, which requires an interpretive reading on the part of the audience. The focus on personal stories, rather than direct institutional criticism, constitutes a strategy for the continuity of production and resistance, allowing for the exploration of themes such as human rights and social justice without explicit confron-

tation with the authorities. Similarly, the treatment of historical themes functions as an indirect commentary on contemporary issues, using the past as a reference for the present. This practice is common in WDI from countries such as South Korea, for example, which revisit periods of dictatorship. Interactivity, in this context, acts not only as a tool for engagement but also as a strategy that broadens interpretations and distributes authorship, creating zones of ambiguity and allowing the audience to co-produce meanings—a practice that may be more viable in scenarios of censorship, as discussed in studies on participation, agency, and interactive modes of documentary (Gaudenzi, 2013; Murray, 1997). However, self-censorship remains a significant limitation in the selection of themes and approaches, restricting the exploration of certain issues and conditioning the way narratives are constructed. This phenomenon not only limits artistic freedom but also hinders the establishment of a broad and transparent public discourse on sensitive topics.

An analysis of the quantitative data reveals a growing trend toward the adoption of immersive technologies in the Asian production of Interactive Web Documentaries (WDI). Approximately 45% of these works already incorporate augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR), a percentage higher than the global average of 28%. This pattern is associated with investments in innovation and an interest in more immersive experiences, in line with discussions on agency, immersion, and transformation in digital narrative (Murray, 1997) and with the analysis of the organizational forms of interactive media as a data-driven culture (Manovich, 2001). This trend is particularly observable in countries such as Japan and Korea, whe-

re technology is rapidly intertwining with cultural practices. The implications of these technological choices encompass the development of new aesthetic languages and the redefinition of the relationship between viewer and narrative. For example, the use of AR/VR allows Asian creators to explore more deeply the spaces of memory and imagination, often associated with urban landscapes or natural settings with symbolic value, in dialogue with the notion of presence and immersion in VR documentary narratives (Shin, 2018) and with the idea of VR as a device for empathy (Milk, 2015). In terms of reach, the works with the highest number of views have reached an estimated 15 million views. However, this distribution is not homogeneous, which indicates the existence of an engaged audience but also points to the need for more effective distribution and accessibility strategies to broaden access to this content, in line with approaches that emphasize user-centered design (Norman, 2013) and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this initial mapping, we examine a developing field characterized by ongoing formal experimentation, aesthetic hybridity, and a focus on social and political issues. Asia's contribution to the global landscape of Interactive Web Documentaries (WDI) is multifaceted; its productions offer unique perspectives that complement existing narratives and challenge prevailing models, which are often Western-centric. Notably, there is a presence of contemplative experiences, oriented toward more introspective and less linear forms of immersion, in line with discussions on modes of WDI and viewer participation (Gaudenzi, 2013;

Nash, 2012). Furthermore, the integration of traditional cultural elements—such as oral narratives, calligraphy, and ancestral philosophies—occurs in a cohesive manner, highlighting a capacity for creative adaptation, in dialogue with approaches to digital culture and identity in Asia (Choi, 2020; Kim, 2018). This inventiveness manifests itself in technological and political contexts specific to the region, in which creators frequently deal with infrastructure constraints and, in some cases, censorship.

The 28 works analyzed in this study, while constituting a representative sample, exhibit diversity in design systems, modes of interaction, and visual languages. From this analysis, three main aesthetic trends emerged that appear to influence regional production. The first is contemplative minimalism, characterized by an emphasis on reflection and immersion rather than the proliferation of stimuli; it frequently employs subtle auditory and visual landscapes to foster meditative or introspective states, articulating agency, immersion, and transformation within the digital narrative (Murray, 1997; Shin, 2018). In contrast, urban maximalism is expressed through the intensive use of colors, sounds, and fragmented narratives, in dialogue with the complexity of Asian megacities and with themes such as gentrification, life in urban peripheries, and social tensions, which can be related to the database logic and interactive media analysis proposed by Manovich (2001). Finally, technological-traditional hybridism combines digital innovations, such as augmented reality and artificial intelligence, with traditional art forms and narratives, establishing connections between the past and the future. These trends are not limited to the stylistic level; they relate to broader cultural

and geopolitical tensions between tradition and modernity, between the local and the global, and between contemplation and the acceleration associated with technological development. The predominance of mobile devices as the primary platform for consuming these documentaries distinguishes Asian production from Euro-American trends, where desktop computers and physical installations still account for a significant share. This technological choice influences design decisions and narrative structures—favoring intuitive interfaces and modular narratives—and also expands access to this content in a region with high smartphone penetration, in line with user-centered design principles (Norman, 2013).

From a theoretical perspective, this study expands the field of research on Web Documentaries and Interactive Web Documentaries (WDI), which has historically focused on Euro-American productions and, in some cases, paid less attention to innovations from other regions. The analysis indicates that existing taxonomies and conceptual frameworks, while useful as a starting point, are insufficient and require adjustments to incorporate the cultural, technological, and political specificities of Asian production, in accordance with the definition of the field and its interactive modalities discussed by Aston (2012) and Gaudenzi (2013). It is thus proposed to greater attention to critical dimensions such as: the relationship with local aesthetic traditions, which influence conceptions of time, space, and interaction; the contexts of censorship and freedom of expression, which may lead creators to develop indirect or allegorical narrative and interactive strategies; the prevailing technological infrastructure, which conditions the accessibility

and distribution of works; and the forms of collective memory specific to each culture, often articulated through interactive narratives about heritage, history, and identity. From a methodological standpoint, the study reinforces the need for interdisciplinary approaches, combining film analysis with cultural, sociological, and technology studies, in order to capture the complexity of these works, as well as systematic strategies for categorization and interpretation.

This mapping contributes to the academic field by expanding the analysis of WDI beyond a Western perspective and offers conceptual references and empirical examples useful for producers in Asia as well as in other contexts. For researchers, the study provides a framework for examining the relationship between culture, technology, and narrative in a non-Western context, fostering comparative analyses and more inclusive theoretical formulations. For producers, the findings on aesthetic trends, adaptation to mobile platforms, and the treatment of social themes can serve as a reference for future developments, encouraging the exploration of languages that take into account the cultural and technological particularities of Asia. The future of WDI in Asia will likely include greater integration of generative artificial intelligence and other technologies, which may expand the possibilities for personalization and interaction, while the integration with extended realities tends to intensify immersion capabilities.

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