

Ambahan ni Ambo:

A Digital Experience

Rodeliza Joyce T. Dival
University of the Philippines Open University
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Abstract

Ambahan ni Ambo: A Digital Experience is an initiative to adapt one of Ed Maranan's stories into a digital platform that focuses on the experiences of each character and how these would translate in real life and give inspiration to its users to follow their example. Two frameworks have been implemented - first is to simplify content by dividing the program into age-appropriate branches that each age-group can easily manage, while the second framework focuses more on the experiences of each of the characters in the story and how readers might see their own real-life experiences with them. This research follows a perspective similar to Design Thinking and revolves around Planning, Creation, and Evaluation.

Introduction and Background

I. Introduction

Stories are a huge part of a nation's culture; they keep records of what happened, they store specific experiences, and for an indigenous group dwindling in numbers, stories keep their culture alive. Their stories are shared so their concerns are heard. For years, Mangyans has been one of the prominent Filipino indigent groups that were mostly located in Mindoro. They have their own culture and own set of stories that ought to be shared. One of those stories is Ambahan ni Ambo, a children's story that opens the readers eyes into what is happening to indigenous tribes in the Philippines.

Ambahan ni Ambo is a story about a family of four visiting the fictional town of Bagong Nayon in Mindoro. The father Pete is a doctor while the mother Tet is a teacher, and they have been holding these medical missions and educational outreach programs for these indigenous tribes around the Philippines. While for the kids, Jack and his older sister Anne, this is their first time to experience how the Mangyans live as they adventure with their new best friend, the Mangyan kid who's skilled at 'ambahan', Ambo.

And while it is primarily a children's story, its purpose is so much more than that. Spreading awareness regarding the Mangyans, both their culture and their experiences, as well as their hardships and strengths, as fellow Filipinos it is necessary to make sure that they are also recognized, even with a simple children's book such as this.

However, given the decline of print books as a result of the rise of technology, storybooks like *Ambahan ni Ambo* and the other creations of author Ed Maranan aren't given much importance any more. According to the 2017 NBDB Readership Survey, Filipino youth have spent an average of 8.70 hours reading print books per month, compared to 14.16 hours reading e-books and 12.68 hours listening to audiobooks. So in order to share this story more, a digital adaptation of said book is the focal point of this research. Taking into consideration the experiences of these characters and giving the readers a chance to mirror these in real life is what this project aims to accomplish.

With the rise of digital technology, there are a lot of ways for users to have a digital experience. It can be something as simple as using a web application on a desktop computer, playing a game on a console, or simply using a smartphone. There are also more advanced ways such as using VR or AR, to the point that you can have holographic projections of the media in the software. And for this project, the simplest yet most effective way is to share it as a mobile application.

II. Related Literature

Digital Cultural Heritage

While Stephens (1992) argues that most picture books reflect what is expected, Mante-Estacio, Dumalay, and Rentillo (2018) emphasize how important it is for writers to create stories that are enlightening and empowering especially for children and their future. For example, Crabb and Marciano's (2016) research regarding the influence of picture books on the formation of ideas in children regarding gender suggests that these picture books can also have influence over indigenous culture, much like what most of Ed Maranan's books intend. Notably, this influence is primarily due to the attention of the children to the pictures rather than text. (Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2005)

Culture evolves as humans do. This is one of the factors that Lenzerini (2011) discusses together with authenticity, respect to human rights, connection to the community, and self-identification that this heritage is part of this culture. He also makes note that right now humanity is moving towards uniformity, rather than enriching cultural variety. With the rise of global mainstream media and technologies that easily connect people around the world, it has become more important to follow the trend. With this, it might be more difficult for audiences to appreciate culture simply because they aren't being talked about anymore. Vrettakis et al. (2019) pointed out how cultural heritage sites such as museums have low funding and other different factors that create this gap when connecting with people. It also has to be mentioned that audiences would choose to engage in the more interesting stories for them. (Padora et al, 2021)

However, given that culture evolves as humans do, the same thing can be said about technology, which does evolve even faster. Several projects incorporate cultural heritage with technology in order to reach more people, as such is Gheorge's BEACONING project (2019) and Narratives Storyboard Editor (2019). These projects are mostly aimed at students and academics who want to learn more and has become an inspiration for this research to tackle the same idea with a much younger audience.

Digital Educational Apps for Children

Given the influence that this project can have on children, it is vital to make sure that the application that will be created is suitable for one of its target audiences, children. Lyman (2004) talks about four different themes that have been observed from the experiences of children with digital media. These are social relationships, creativity, games and gaming, and digital divides. Freier (2009) also describes children as an embodied, situated, dynamic, intentional, social, and moral individuals; six aspects that should be considered when designing technology for them.

Mitschek et al. (2017) has created interactive books with Filipino folktales and evaluated them based on their usability etc. There are quite a few models regarding how to determine an application's usability, effectiveness, even learnability. These tackle their design, interactivity, response time, and all the other components that an application should have to be working properly. Complex gesture controls, errors, demonstrations to understand the activities, and navigation are just a few of the concerns that have been pointed out. There is also the problem of pop-up advertisements that are quite rampant in almost every application nowadays. (Stichnothe, 2014)

Research Question

How can I create a digital experience that lets the users embody the values and experiences the characters had in the book, *Ambahan ni Ambo*?

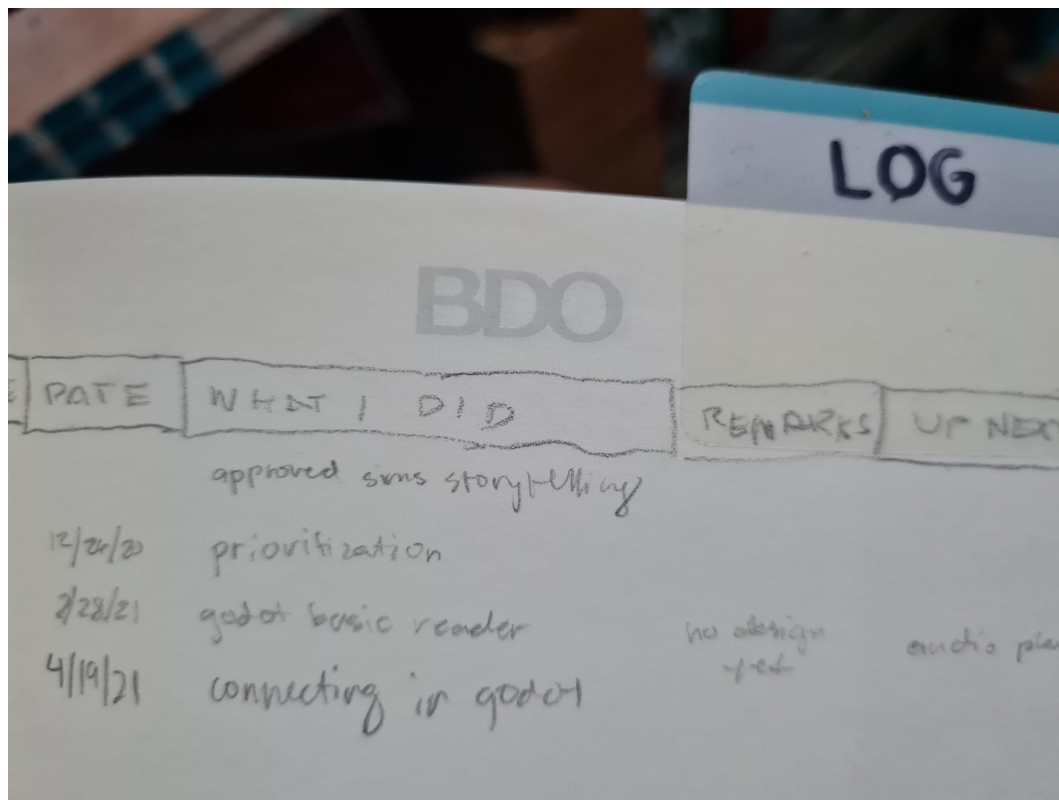
Process

Originally, it was Design Thinking that I wanted to implement for this project as it takes note of what the users wanted and reimagines itself to serve that purpose. However, with current circumstances preventing me from having users to study and get feedback from, improvisation

was vital. This new methodology still stems from Design Thinking - but a lot more selfish given that the researcher is also the one who evaluates.

My methodology adapts the Design Thinking method (Brown, 2009), but rather than its five stages, this one cycles around three things - Plan, Create, and Evaluate. Part of this was also inspired from my own experience in bullet journaling such as planning the keys and legends that I will use for the month, creating the logs, and finally evaluating the entries (sometimes by months or weeks or even days) if I was able to accomplish my goals that time. Evaluation was continuously done throughout, both of the process and the product; while the app was not externally tested on users, I positioned evaluation of the product based on what I might appreciate as a potential audience of the product.

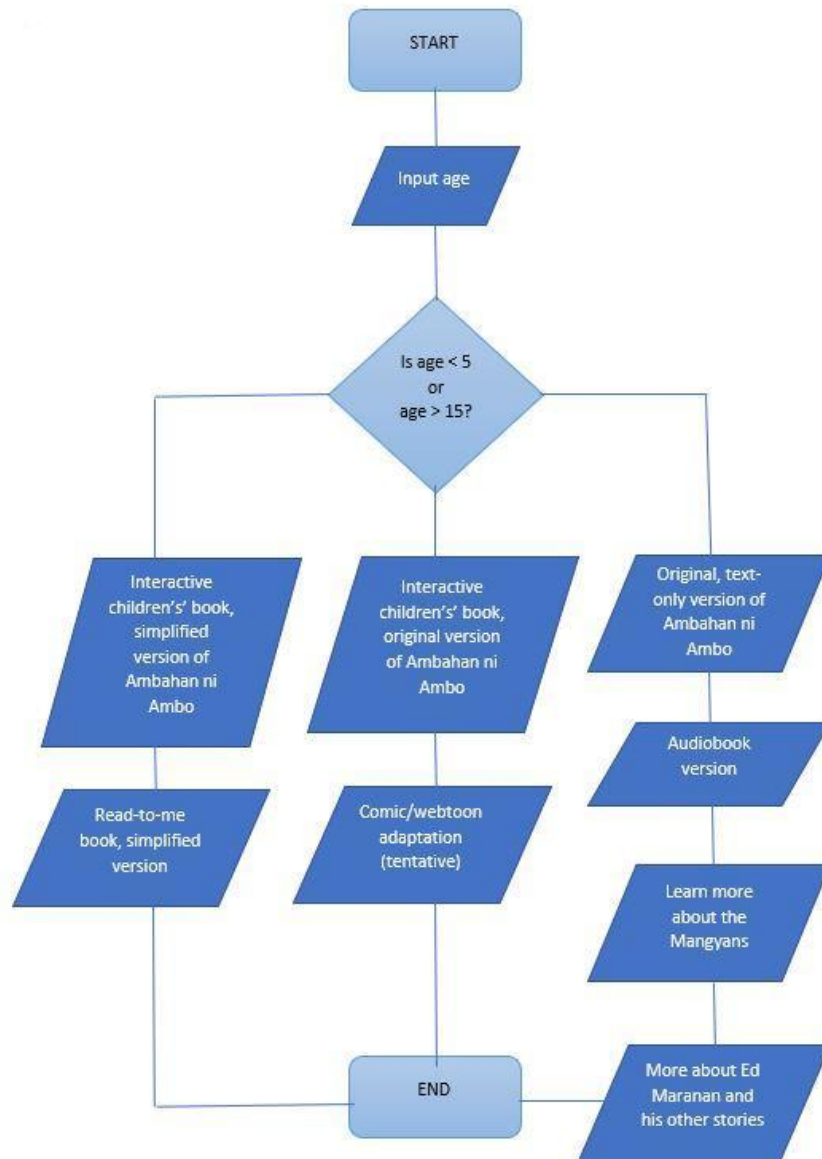
The decision to create a mobile application was easily set in stone but the way to approach that was the one where this method was first created and applied. One of the earliest logs for this project tagged the Planning stage as 'prioritization' which is also apt for its description.



Open source game engine Godot will be utilized to create the whole application, including the codes, framework, and exportation for mobile use. Most assets that will be used for the project are also open source such as fonts from GoogleFonts. Software used are also open source, Audacity for audio recordings and OBS for video recordings. Visual art assets are created using Sims 4, including the characters, icons, and backgrounds.

Outcomes

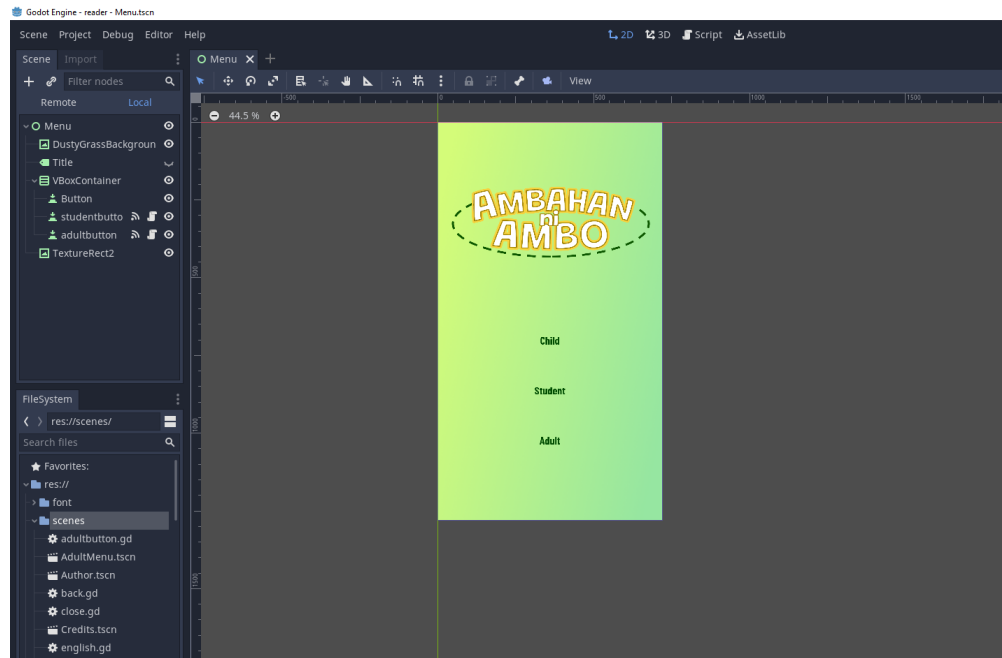
I. Experience by Age Group



Original framework for the Ambahan ni Ambo project

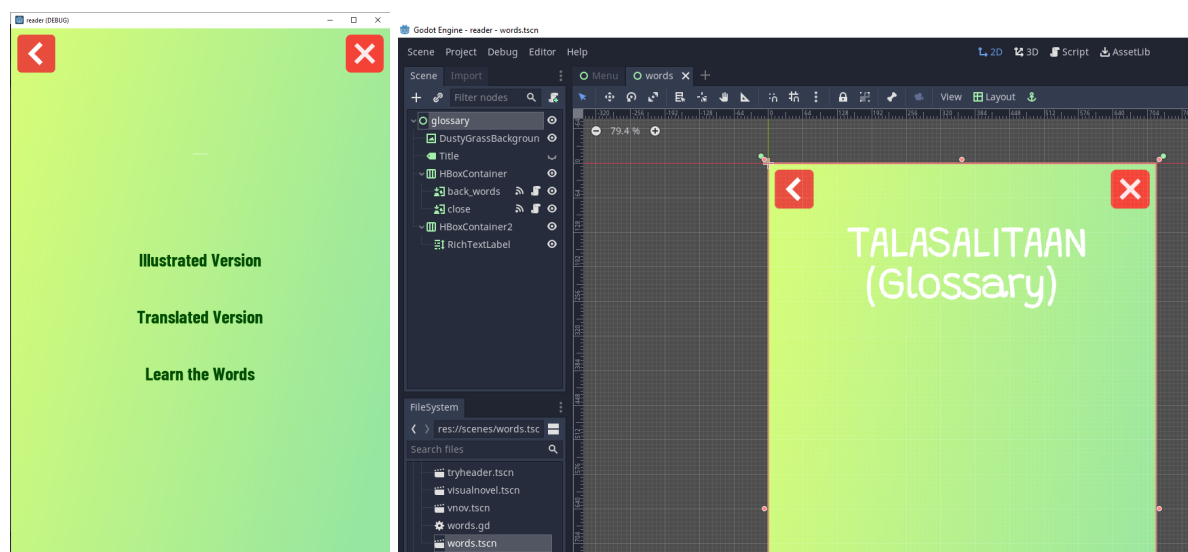
For the first prototype, it felt like it would be easier for the audiences to absorb if they were segregated into their age groups - children, students, and adults. This is to simplify the story for children, enrich the learning process of students, and inspire adults to help the way these characters did.

The plan is to create each scene by following the framework and then connect each other through the use of Godot's signals, scripts and nodes. This is visually possible through buttons that easily directs users throughout the application.



A screenshot of the first prototype's Main Menu in the Godot editor

Each division offers something for each age group. For children, an interactive storybook, a simple game, and even a read-to-me story time session. For students, a tagalog-english glossary especially for unfamiliar words in Tagalog. Also planned to be included is a webcomic version of the story.



Student Menu and a planned glossary for Learn The Words

Lastly, for the adults, the text-only version is available in both English and Tagalog, as well as a recorded audiobook of both languages. There will also be information regarding the author's other works as well as details on how to support the Mangyans and other Filipino Indigent communities.



Midway through the project, this original division was discarded because it seemed a little too much. Upon evaluation, a lot of things were going on at once and it seemed to remove focus from what the research was truly about. In order to get back on track, an overhaul was needed. At some point it did feel like it would be better to tackle a different project but at the same time, the potential of this specific idea is something worth all the effort.

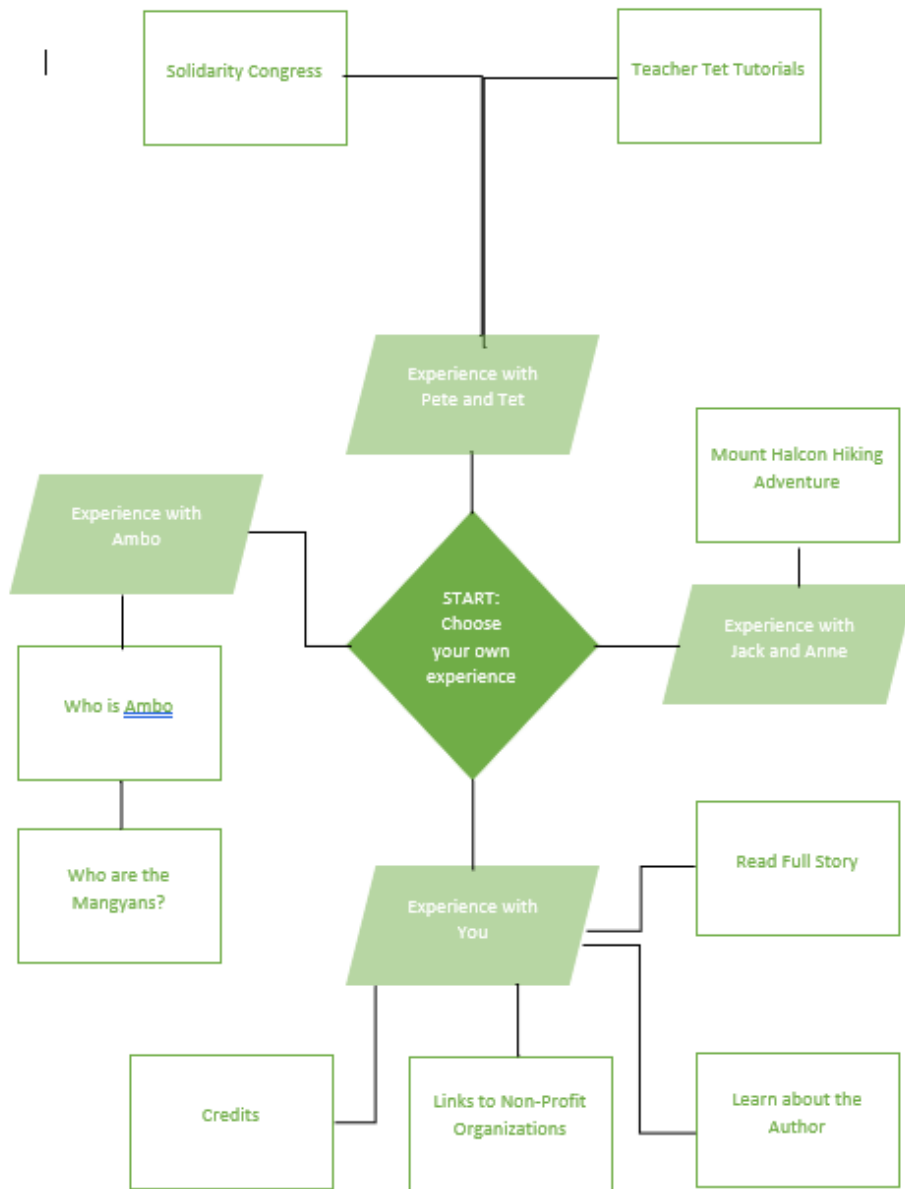
The revamp went all the way back to the research question itself. The original question focuses on how it can be adapted digitally and the application framework that was created tackled all of these different ways that it can - interactive story for kids, e-reader. Audiobooks, etc. The app that was planned was supposed to bring all of those together in one nifty package. However, as stated above, it was too ambitious for a single person to do, especially with limited resources.

So to reframe the research question, it was vital to determine what is the most important aspect of the book that had to be adapted digitally. Was it because it was a children's story? Was it because of cultural representation? All of these factors make up the story but the most important was the lesson that the characters wanted to impart to the readers.

II. Experience by Characters

A new framework was drafted, taking a similar approach to the last one but focuses more on what the characters experienced so that the audience could as well. The plan continues to utilize the scenes and connect them via buttons since they were still viable concepts even after evaluation. However, what changed was how the contents were framed and presented.

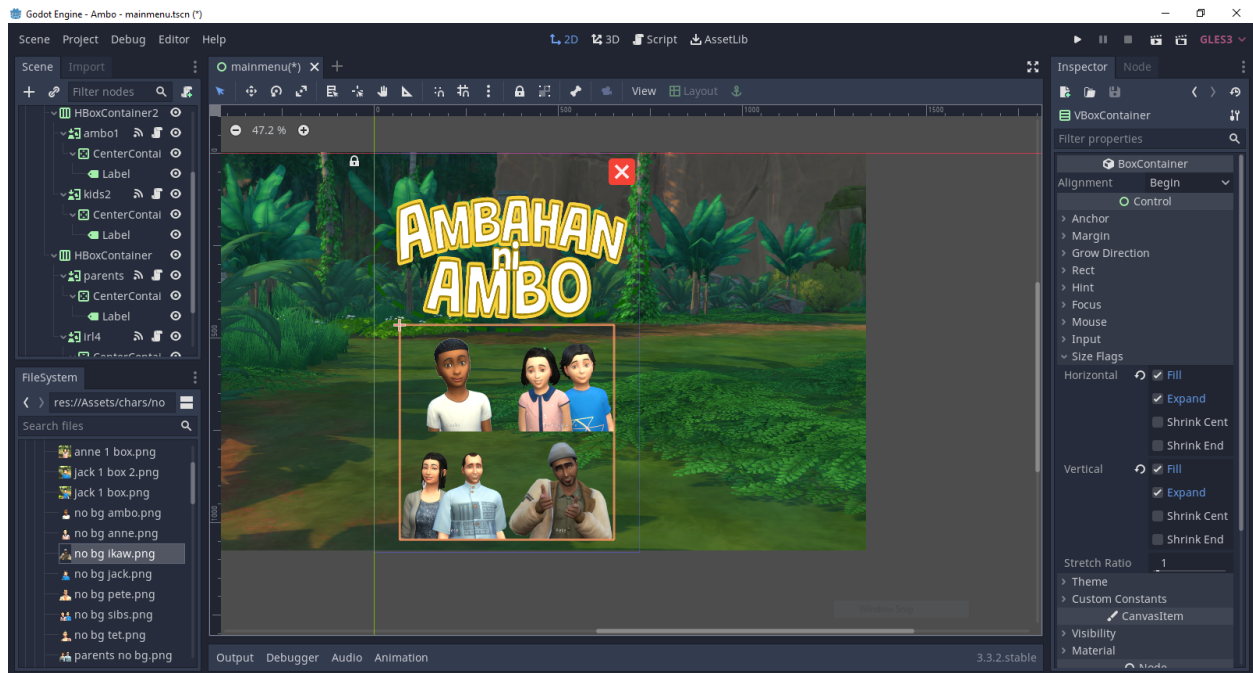
This one is divided into four parts as well, partly so that they would be easier to place on the interface. First we have Experience with Ambo, an introduction to his characters and the Mangyans. The next two are Experience with Jack and Anne and Experience with Pete and Tet, and it has been decided to separate the kids from their parents because they have different experiences. Last but definitely not the least is Experience with You, where the audience can do what these characters did - help out indigent communities in our country.



Revised Framework for the Ambahan ni Ambo Experience

For Experience with Ambo, the most important focus is to introduce the characters especially Ambo and the Mangyans. Their culture has to be present even in the background and it was crucial to get their outfits and character design as close to the real Mangyans. For Experience with Jack and Anne, since their most prominent scene was the part of the climax when they hiked up Mount Halcon, this was their main focus. Ambo, Jack, and Anne climb up the mountain and excerpts from the story are weaved together to create an interactive retelling of the kids' hiking adventure.

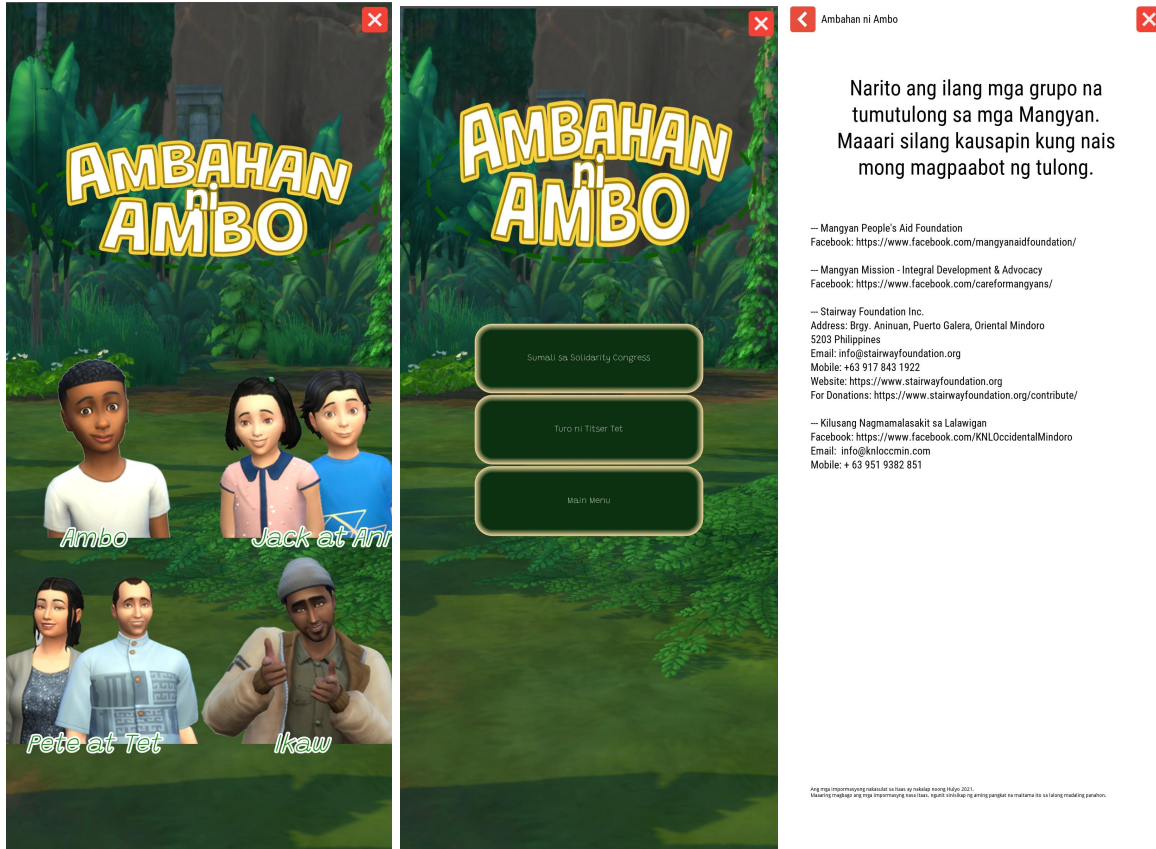
Now, for the two other options, it gears toward the older audiences. Experience with Pete and Tet tackles the parent's experiences especially with the solidarity congress which gives light to other indigenous groups. There is also Tet's teaching corner where she discusses what Ambahan is and gives pointers to whoever may want to try and create their own. An additional feature of translating unfamiliar Filipino words into English as well as sharing about the native Mangyan alphabet - hanunu`o.



Prototype 2 of the application, this time with visual Sims 4 assets

For the last experience, it is more geared towards real life. Information about the author and his other works as well as several non profit organizations that help these indigent communities are listed for awareness. There is also an e-reader that has the original story and a translated English version that they can access. It was planned to have an audiobook retelling of the story but with the lack of resources, maybe other researchers can include it in their own adaptations.

In the end, the final product that will be created is a mobile application that has all of the stated features. And while this research tackles the creation of the app, it is in its best interest to have this mobile application distributed to various communities and spread awareness to Filipinos.



Some screenshots of the final application from my Samsung Galaxy S20 FE

Analysis and Reflections

The original plan was to create an app that can accommodate all ages, therefore splitting the digital experience by age. However, it strayed from the original intention which was to let users experience what happened in the story. It may be fictional but it mirrors a lot of experiences that Filipinos have, especially indigenous Filipinos. Given that the characters have different experiences in the story, it became more prudent to actually integrate their experiences with the different content planned for the application.

When it comes to design, it was crucial that the project looks attractive but not too striking, hence, the green palette all throughout the app. The pages that contain information are using a white background in order to let the users focus more on the content. The same thought process made sure that the logo is readable and attention grabbing at the same time.

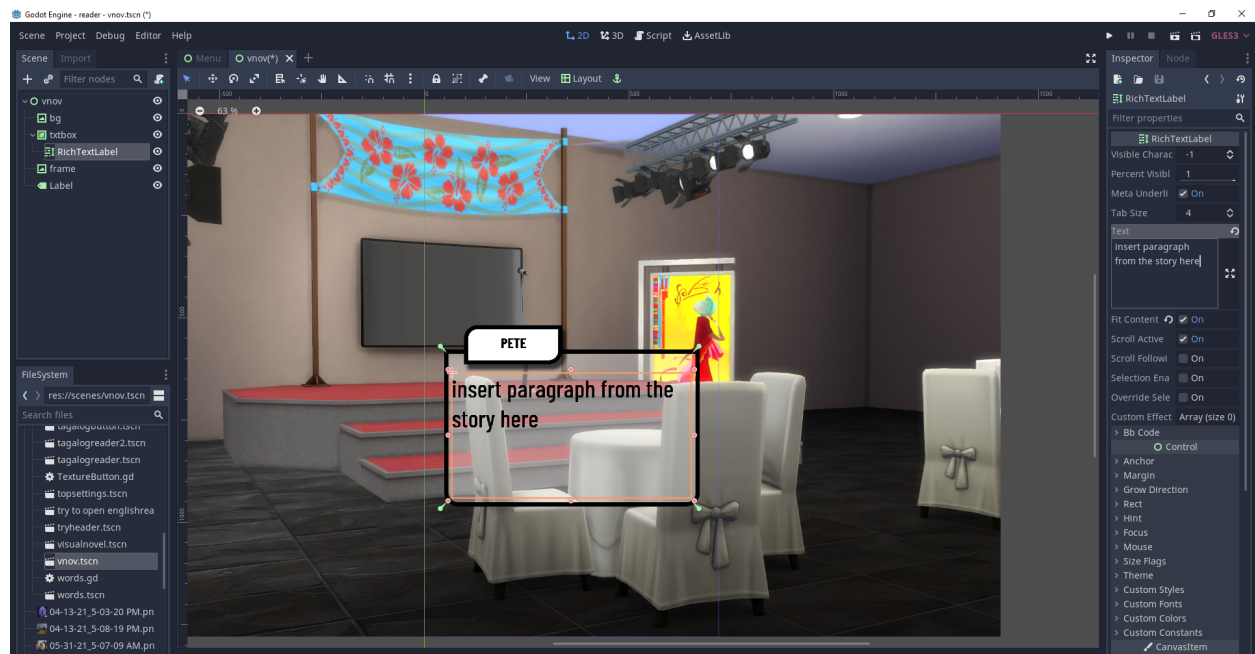


The Ambahan ni Ambo logo and its different iterations

Another hurdle with regard to design is the lack of appropriate costumes for the characters. Especially for the solidarity congress, where the plan was to distinctly differentiate each of the indigenous groups that users will instantly recognize. However, the clothes that are available in the game are limited. Sims 4 creators are mostly American/European, and the game is constantly developing. While user made custom content is available, the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to dive into that is unmanageable.

Pursuing this project further could have better cutscenes, you can animate the whole thing, adapt in other digital ways. The original concept for the childrens' interactive storybook was

inspired by visual novel games.



Those interested in improving this project can start with optimizing the app itself. As an amateur developer, there have been a lot of challenges that had to be worked around just so the app can be implemented. A lot of sizing problems, even for just one device (Samsung S20 FE), has become one of the endgame hurdles that had to be overcome.

And then there is making this app available for other platforms such as IOS, the web, or even in VR - especially since the setting of the story is a real place in Mindoro, Philippines. One of the disregarded ideas was about an Augmented Reality tourist attraction where if you visit the exact site, there will be a situated marker there and you can scan it using your smartphone and a cutscene from the book will play.

From a research standpoint, this project can also be utilized in a case study regarding user design and user experience especially for children, students, and adults - even if the original framework had been disregarded, they were still the intended audience. Other works of Ed Maranan, as well as other children's books from Filipino authors are still available to be adapted in a similar way, maybe even better.

Conclusion

Interactive storytelling is the evolution of print books. Everyone spends most of their time on their phones and if you really want to connect, you should also keep up with technology. Ambahan ni Ambo's publisher has also stopped printing more copies since books aren't as

widely used today. Adapting it digitally is also one way to keep the story alive, the way Trese had been adapted into a Netflix series just this July 2021. Even though the story was first published in the Philippines way back in 2007, and now it is available in the US since November 2020. Having these kinds of stories shared globally give more opportunities for Filipinos to discover more stories that are created locally which in turn get more writers to have more confidence to publish their own.

And while local stories are not as popular in our country as their international contemporaries, Trese now serves as an inspiration for Filipino writers, artists, and creatives for global recognition. Even if we might lack the resources and capabilities to create something as large-scale as Trese, this application that I have created hopes to serve as another way for traditional stories to make their way into the digital world.

The main objective of this project is, in fact, to show how possible it is to create a digital experience from a story and let its users experience what the characters have gone through. And while not too literal, this Ambahan ni Ambo digital experience hopefully embodies the spirit of bayanihan that the story wanted its readers to have. This project prides itself into being one of the first to digitally adapt a simple story in a whole new experience and encourages the readers of this paper to improve upon this project or create their own.

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