

STONE MONUMENT ENSEMBLES AND THE CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT

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MILESTONE 8

**STORYTELLING EXPERIMENT WITH PARTICIPANTS IN SLS TO
CREATE CONTENT FOR THE STECCI EDUCATIONAL GAME**



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Storytelling experiment with participants in the SLs to create content for the STECCI Educational Game

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1. INTRODUCTION

In task 5.2, ZSI designed and implemented together with pilot partners a new participatory research format: With the storytelling workshop “My STECCI Stories” contemporary perspectives, stories and knowledge on the cultural heritage were collected, which will foster to the development of the Educational Game in T4.2, and the summer academies in T5.3.

Moderated group discussions and critical-creative interventions revealed the:

Historical Perspective – This approach highlights the significance of the artefacts within their local and broader historical contexts. It provides valuable insights into how the environment surrounding the stećci has evolved over centuries.

Personal and Biographical Links – Individual stories can illustrate the cultural and regional relevance of stećci. Everyday experiences and oral histories may offer fresh interpretations of the historical landscape, fostering a deeper connection between past and present.

Factual and Tacit Knowledge – Practical insights can enhance accessibility and mobility around stećci sites, contribute to the development of new cultural routes or educational initiatives, and support sustainable tourism strategies by enriching narratives with authentic local knowledge.

This milestone represents a significant step forward in embedding authentic, community-driven narratives within the STECCI Educational Game, thereby reinforcing the project’s commitment to digital heritage innovation. By integrating lived experiences with academic expertise, the project not only enhances cultural awareness and engagement but also contributes to the broader discourse on digital preservation and interactive education within the field of European cultural heritage.

2. MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Milestone 8 of the STECCI project represents a pivotal step in advancing the preservation and digital engagement of the medieval tombstones. These unique tombstones, scattered across the southeast of Europe, are of significant historical, cultural, and artistic value, yet they remain under-appreciated and vulnerable to environmental and anthropogenic threats. To address this, the project employs innovative storytelling techniques to enhance public awareness, foster educational engagement, provide narrative background and thus contribute to the digital preservation of this cultural heritage.

The primary aim of Milestone 8 was to conduct a structured storytelling experiment within the Social Labs (SLs) to generate compelling, research-based content for the STECCI Educational Game.

This educational tool is designed to provide an interactive experience for users, blending historical accuracy with immersive narratives that bring the past to life. To achieve this objective, a rigorous methodological approach was undertaken, encompassing participatory storytelling, expert interviews, and multimedia documentation. The interviews spanned three key regions - Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro where stećci are most prevalent, ensuring a diverse and comprehensive representation of cultural narratives and perspectives.

3. STORYTELLING EXPERIMENT WITH PARTICIPANTS IN THE SLS TO CREATE CONTENT FOR THE STEĆCI EDUCATIONAL GAME

Storytelling is a potent participatory method, which helps to contextualise data, providing rich and nuanced insights into individual and collective experiences.

In the context of cultural heritage, the concept of “relational aesthetics” can be applied to engage communities in the preservation and interpretation of these historical artefacts by emphasising the community relations and experiences in citizen science. Bringing an aesthetic moment can encourage the active involvement of communities and citizens in the preservation of cultural heritage, a sensitive valorisation and the adaptive re-use.

In the three social lab regions, the following dimensions and aspects were reflected:

- 1) Stećci as Cultural and Historical Markers of Identity
- 2) Environmental and Human Threats to the Preservation of Stećci
- 3) Stećci as Testimonies of Medieval Social and Political Structures
- 4) Environmental and Human Threats to the Preservation of Stećci
- 5) The Artistic and Cultural Importance of the Stećci
- 6) Political, Legal, and Gendered Perspectives on Stećci

The storytelling experiment was conducted within the framework of WP5, specifically under T5.2. The methodological approach revolved around participatory storytelling, incorporating semi-structured interviews, multimedia documentation, and detailed thematic analysis. This comprehensive strategy ensured that the narratives collected were well-structured, historically sound, and deeply engaging.

The data collection phase involved in-depth interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders, including local historians, archaeologists, cultural heritage experts, and community members. The objective was to gather an extensive range of oral histories, folklore, and personal accounts that shed light on the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of stećci. The interviews were complemented by multimedia documentation, including photographs, audio recordings, and video footage, which serve as valuable resources for the integration of these narratives into the game.

Once the data collection phase was completed, the focus shifted to structuring the content in a way that aligned with the educational objectives of the STECCI Educational Game. The collected narratives were meticulously analysed and categorised into key thematic areas, including:

- **Historical Perspective:** Examining the origins, dating methodologies, and symbolic representations found on stećci.
- **Personal and Biographical Links:** Exploring how stećci have been perceived and interacted with over generations, incorporating folklore, myths, and contemporary cultural perspectives.
- **Factual and Tacit Knowledge:** Practical insights improve accessibility to stećci sites, aid cultural route development, and support sustainable tourism through authentic local knowledge.

These themes were then mapped onto the game's interactive mechanics, ensuring that the educational content was seamlessly integrated into the player experience.

4. KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

One of the most significant outcomes of this milestone was the successful integration of local and expert perspectives into the game's narrative framework. By capturing first-hand accounts, historical insights, and cultural interpretations, the project has enriched the game's content with authentic, community-driven storytelling. This approach not only enhances user engagement but also reinforces the educational value of the game by offering multiple lenses through which players can explore the stećci and their broader historical context.

Additionally, the milestone has significantly strengthened community involvement in cultural heritage conservation efforts. Engaging local historians, archaeologists, cultural experts, and community members has fostered a deeper sense of ownership and responsibility towards the preservation of stećci. This participatory approach ensures that the narratives presented in the game are not only accurate but also reflective of the lived experiences of those most closely connected to these monuments.

A further achievement of this milestone is the refinement of the game's overarching narrative structure to ensure both historical accuracy and emotional resonance. By leveraging participatory storytelling methodologies, the project has been able to craft narratives that are both engaging and educational, making the historical content more accessible and compelling for a younger audience. This narrative approach aligns with contemporary best practices in digital heritage storytelling, where interactivity and immersion are key to fostering meaningful engagement with historical content.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO THE EDUCATIONAL GAME

The STECCI Educational Game is designed as an interactive informative tool that merges historical education with engaging gameplay. As a 2D stylised game, it allows for swift development using illustrated assets based on 2D depictions of 3D models. Based on an edutainment approach, the game will adopt a pedagogical approach that enhances engagement, knowledge retention, and experiential learning by integrating interactive and immersive elements into educational content. This methodology is proven particularly effective in historical game design, where narrative-driven mechanics, gamification, and sensory-rich experiences facilitate deeper cognitive connections to historical contexts. by creating an interactive and playful platform that educates users about the motifs, symbolism, and historical relevance of Stećci but also informs the people about the project. These mechanics not only enhance player engagement but also serve to convey historical narratives in a meaningful and immersive way. In the broader context of things, the educational game will function as a platform to explore the historic relationships between the sites, the meanings behind motifs and designs, how people access and use the sites in the recent past and today. It will be a tool to delve into the work of the Stecci project and the processes that underpin it – climate research, conservation work and digitisation processes. At the core of the game lies its narrative framework, which is crucial in shaping level design, mechanics, aesthetics, and objectives. The game's primary focus is to explore the historical and cultural significance of stećci, the medieval tombstones scattered across the southeast of Europe. By ensuring that the narrative remains broad and adaptable, the game avoids being tied to a singular location or storyline, allowing players to experience the interconnected nature of stećci across various sites. The inclusion of climate change as a thematic element further enriches the story, making it not only a historical exploration but also a contemporary reflection on preservation and environmental impact.

Milestone 8 represents a crucial development in the ongoing efforts to integrate community-driven narratives into digital heritage applications. By combining rigorous academic research with participatory storytelling methodologies, the STECCI project has successfully created a framework for engaging, educational, and historically rich content within the STECCI Educational Game. This milestone underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in heritage conservation, demonstrating how digital tools can be effectively utilised to preserve and promote cultural heritage for future generations.

The insights gained through this process will not only enhance the STECCI Educational Game but also contribute to the broader discourse on digital preservation, interactive education on various topics (cultural heritage, stećci, climate change, conservation etc.), and community-driven cultural heritage initiatives. In the broader context of public history, games can be powerful tools for shaping historical consciousness. By embedding authentic, lived experiences within digital platforms, the project ensures that the rich history of stećci remains accessible, engaging, and meaningful for audiences worldwide.

REFERENCES

1. **Deliverable 5.1** – Handbook for Stećci Labs – submitted 2024 (in review)