

12 | LES BARONS – AN URBAN TREASURE HUNT THROUGH LA CHAUX-DE-FONDS' WATCHMAKING HERITAGE.

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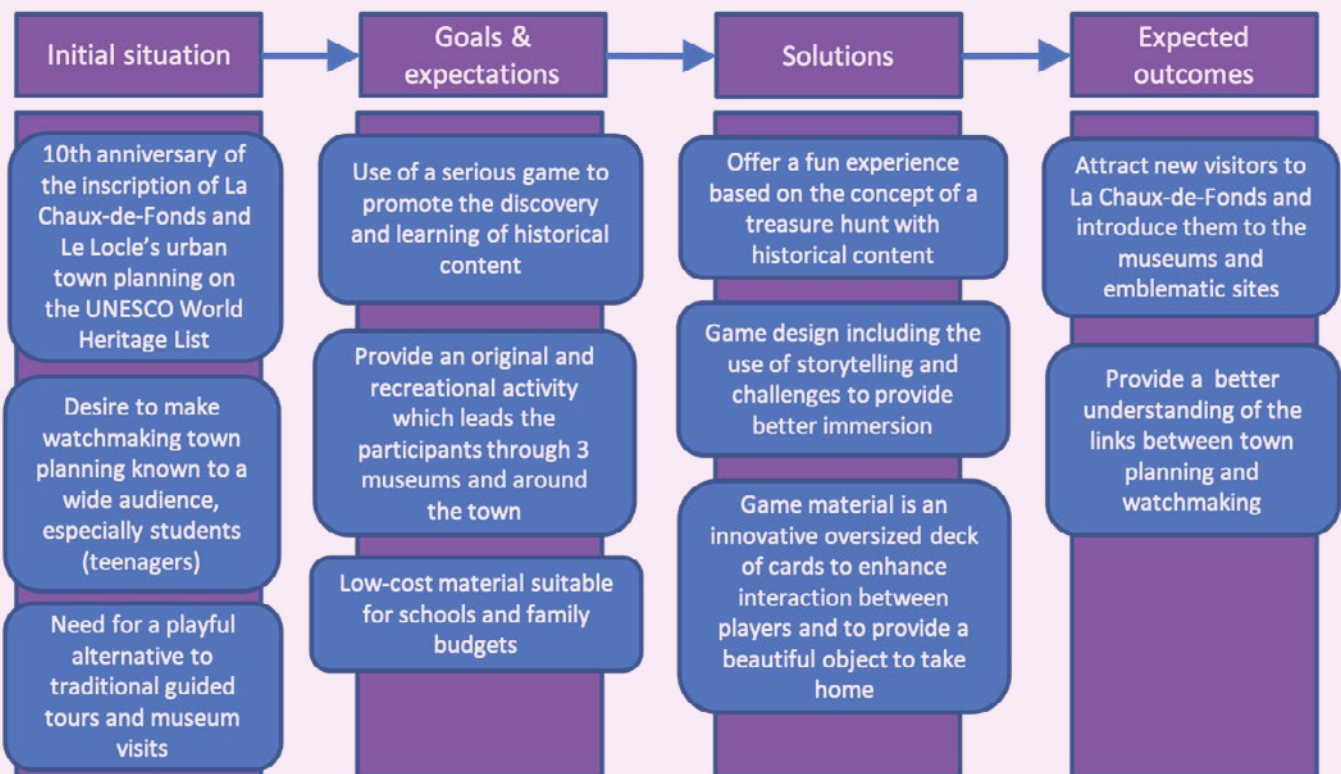
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ABSTRACT

La Chaux-de-Fonds was built in the 19th century by watchmakers for watchmaking. It is an exceptional example of the symbiosis existing between industry and urban planning. In 2019, the town celebrated the 10th anniversary of its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. On this occasion, an innovative treasure hunt was created to introduce the general public to this particular form of urban development. This serious game is now a permanent cultural and touristic offer.

KEYWORDS

Watchmaking town planning, UNESCO World Heritage, cultural heritage, La Chaux-de-Fonds, serious game, treasure hunt, storytelling, immersion, communication, education, architecture, industry, history, art nouveau, urbanism, fun.





CONTEXT

Once a large village, La Chaux-de-Fonds was virtually burned to the ground by a fire in 1794. Born from the ashes was a rationally organised town whose urbanism planning favoured not only the watchmaking industry but also the wellbeing of its inhabitants. Thanks to the boom of the watchmaking industry, the town developed rapidly during the second half of the 19th century. By 1900 it was known as the “Watchmaking Metropolis”. On 27 June 2009, the watchmaking town planning of La Chaux-de-Fonds and Le Locle was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. A call for projects was issued to mark the 10th anniversary of this recognition in 2019.

The selected project proposed by “Entrée de Jeux” aims to explore this complex topic in the form of a treasure hunt through the museums and the town.

The game can be found at the International Watchmaking Museum, the History Museum and the Fine Arts Museum of La Chaux-de-Fonds, in partnership with Tourisme neuchâtelois. It was funded by the “Fondation en faveur de la mise en valeur du site de La Chaux-de-Fonds / Le Locle inscrit sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial de l’UNESCO”.

TARGETED ISSUES

The main challenge for the game creation was to make this rather technical subject pleasant and accessible to a large and varied public. Watchmaking town planning is not a trendy subject, especially for the younger generation.

For the game to be educational and based on historical facts, it was necessary to unveil this rich watchmaking universe filled with interesting places, colourful characters and anecdotes related to this secretive industry, as well as other aspects such as architectural concepts.

The aim was to meet the need for a funny and original offer to complement the traditional museum visits and city tours. To showcase three of the town’s museums, it was requested that the first challenges of the game take place inside these institutions; the rest of the route could then take place throughout the city streets.

Teenagers are the game’s target audience. The game is conceived to appeal to class outings organisers and to introduce the public to the Watchmaking Metropolis history. As adolescents are a difficult audience to captivate, a judicious choice of game format and content was essential, which include storytelling and regular challenges allowing a better immersion. Families and tourist groups are secondary target audiences. The game must therefore be adapted to a variety of profiles, including children and seniors. The number of participants is highly variable. The treasure hunt can be enjoyed alone or in groups of up to 6 people.

A funny and original offer to complement the traditional museum visits



PROPOSED SOLUTION

The chosen solution was proposed by “Entrée de Jeux”, a cooperative company formed by game authors and historians (among other skills), which specialises in highly themed serious games creation.

“Les Barons” tells the story of emblematic places and watchmaking town planning in a playful way. Historical facts are mixed with an imaginary story which takes the participants through various emblematic places. The narrative provides a true immersion feeling. Players go in search of Uncle Louis’, a fictional character, stolen watch. As they investigate, they get to know the four potential suspects, who were powerful and real watchmaking factory directors. The treasure hunt is driven by a gripping story full of twists and turns.



Observation-based enigmas lead to the discovery of clues regarding the potential guilt or innocence of the suspects. Period and modern photographs with offbeat titles accompany the players. Specific “Did you know?” sections offer true anecdotes. The game, which lasts 2 hours on average, ends with the analysis of the collected clues and the opening of a secret box... This activity is suitable for teenagers from the age of 12, or younger children if accompanied by an adult.

The game support is an oversized deck of cards, the size of a postcard. There is one card for each stage of the adventure. The graphic design is fashionable with bright colours and illustrations presented like the social networks galleries.

RELEVANT INNOVATION

The creation of a serious game allowing to discover the characteristics of watchmaking town planning in a playful way seems to be a first. Though many urban treasure hunts exist in the region, their themes are generally designed to make the game immersive, and thus offer a purely recreational experience. “Les Barons” is entirely based on historical content: almost every detail can refer to facts and specific historical and industrial notions. The game is conceived so that participants may learn this content in a subtle way and thanks to amusing touches. The game therefore stands out of traditional guidebooks.

The decision to publish an oversized deck of cards instead of using a brochure or a digital application is original and brings an important advantage. Players can complete the tasks together or share out the roles as they desire. It is up to them to decide who manages the cards, guides the group, reads the story and collects the clues. Thus, all the group participants can be involved.

Moreover, the game is also a beautiful object which can be kept and re-read at home. A postcard is included in the pack. As the game material was relatively inexpensive to produce (less than CHF 10.-/deck), the activity can be provided at a very attractive price. This makes it accessible to all audiences alike, especially school groups and families.

We took care to use symbols that adapt the game to colourblind people (8% of males and 0.5% of females of Northern European descent)..



PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS

A first series of 180 copies has been available since June 2019 and on sale in the museums and tourist offices over the summer and autumn. Several schools from the towns surrounding La Chaux-de-Fonds have already chosen to discover the exceptional history of the Watchmaking Metropolis by taking part in this treasure hunt. The demand from school teachers for this kind of experience is confirmed. The game's innovative support, an oversized deck of cards, definitely enhances the interaction between players. Feedback from students and teachers is positive as is the feedback from families and groups of friends. The game works well, and they discovered the basics of watchmaking town planning and enjoyed a pleasant time, including in the museums. Now that the concept has been proven, further developments are in progress.

Along with the four points of sale, an internet page promotes the game and provides practical information. Promotional actions for 2020 are in progress. Now convinced of the potential of “Les Barons”, the project partners (Tourisme neuchâtelois, the museums and the “Fondation en faveur de la mise en valeur du site de La Chaux-de-Fonds / Le Locle inscrit sur la Liste du patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO”) are invested in promoting the game further. The objective of perpetuating this treasure hunt for several years is being achieved.

CONCLUSION

With the presence of a new urban treasure hunt, La Chaux-de-Fonds has a complementary tool to attract visitors, including classes with teenagers. This serious game is available all year round. It allows participants to discover watchmaking town planning in a playful and immersive way thanks to the gripping narrative and observation enigmas. It combines different levels of information going from basic notions to historically precise details to meet the interests of a varied public.

PERSPECTIVES AND NEEDS

Recently, the Ludesco Game Festival, which attracted 10,000 players in 2019, has become a partner. In March, it's 11th edition will serve as a platform to promote the game among its participants.

Soon, the game will be edited for a second time in French. A translated edition in German is also about to go to press. This means that more than 600 additional copies will be available in 2020 and that Swiss-German classes and groups will be able to get to know “Les Barons”.

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