Rhetoric of Interaction: Analysis of Pathos

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Abstract. The study of rhetoric evolved from focusing solely on discourse, in Ancient Greece, to the inclusion of audiovisual elements in the 20th century. Today, a ubiquitously digital world opens a new field of research, which might be called "rhetoric of interaction". The purpose of this work is to explore rhetorical possibilities of interactive features, that is, how different interactive design solutions may influence the apprehension of messages and help the building of arguments. Based on Aristotelian concepts of classical rhetoric, this study concentrates on the presence of the appeal of pathos, that is, an appeal to the emotions of visitors, with analyses of three websites: "Pablo the Flamingo", "World Under Water", and "Sortie en Mer".

Keywords: Interaction · Rhetoric · Pathos · Interface design

1 Introduction

Mostly connected to persuasion, rhetoric can be defined as guidelines to construct effective communication. It can also be seen as a means to provide the audience with motivation for adopting a new attitude or taking a new course of action. It is a tool for achieving goals, generating responses. In that sense, rhetoric is present in all kinds of communication. Gui Bonsiepe [1] affirms, "informative assertions are interlarded with rhetoric to a greater or lesser degree. (…) 'Pure' information exists for the designer only in arid abstraction. As soon as he begins to give it concrete shape, the process of rhetorical infiltration begins."

Digital pieces such as websites, accordingly, have rhetorical aspects as well. They aim to persuade visitors to purchase goods or contract a service, participate in a project, admire a brand, or believe that their content is relevant, interesting and true. At the very least, they try to convince visitors that it is worth to stay connected for a while.

Text and images play an important part in building arguments and influencing visitors, but there is another important rhetorical element, especially in digital communication: interaction. The very ways through which in which users interact with websites influence the apprehension of messages, as tools of persuasion. Still, while much has been studied about verbal rhetoric since Ancient Greece and about visual rhetoric since the mid-20th century, the same does not apply to the rhetoric of interaction. This work aims to contribute to this field, using a classical principle from the Aristotelian study of discourse: the rhetorical appeal of pathos.

Based on principles of classical rhetoric, we can analyze the presence of three appeals: ethos, logos and pathos. Ethos focuses on attributes of the speaker, such as character and credibility; logos, on the message and the use of reasoning to construct an argument; and pathos appeals to emotions of the audience [2]. The purpose of this paper is to explore rhetorical possibilities of interactive features that appeal to visitors' emotions, through the analysis of three websites: Pablo The Flamingo, promoting the adoption of flamingos, World Under Water, warning about dangers of global warming, and Sortie en Mer, that works as a drowning simulator.

2 Rhetoric

Rhetoric is a dynamic, polysemic term, of which implications vary with time and author. Classical rhetoric focused in speech and, later, in written text. In the twentieth century, authors such as Barthes [3], Bonsiepe [1] and Durand [4] have expanded the study of rhetoric, including visual arguments. Later, Buchanan [5] examined rhetoric in products. In the twenty-first century, authors such as Bonsiepe [6] and Joost [7] initiated studies of rhetoric in audiovisual media.

Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" [2]. Barthes [8] identifies six sides of rhetoric: (1) a technique, that is, an art in the classical sense of the word: "art of persuasion, body of rules and recipes whose implementation makes it possible to convince the hearer of the discourse (and later the reader of the work)"; (2) a teaching: since the art of rhetoric, initially transmitted by personal means, was introduced into institutions of learning; (3) a science, that is, a field of observation and classification of language phenomena; (4) an ethic, as a group of rules with a practical goal and moral code; (5) a social practice, since rhetoric is a power that allows privileged classes to hold ownership of speech; and (6) a ludic practice, with what Barthes calls *black rhetoric*: "games, parodies, erotic or obscene allusions".

According to Eco [9, 10], Aristotle defined the difference between dialectic and rhetoric discourses in the fact that the former looks for rationally accepted conclusions, while the latter articulates its own rhetorical syllogisms—the enthymemes—, in order to obtain not only rational agreement, but also emotional adherence from the audience. The rationale of enthymemes does not have the same degree of certainty as logical syllogisms have, but its intention is to serve as evidence. For this sake, there are proofs provided by the discourse, which, according to Aristotle, lie in three areas: the character of the speaker (ethos), discourse itself (logos) and emotions aroused in the audience (pathos).

Rhetoric concentrates on provoking decisions, which are based on more than logical arguments. By addressing audience's emotions, the speaker can bring them into the appropriate mindset to agree with his arguments. Aristotle [2] commented on the importance of influencing audience's emotions: "When people are feeling friendly and placable, they think one sort of thing; when they are feeling angry or hostile, they think either something totally different or the same thing with a different intensity: when they feel friendly to the man who comes before them for judgment, they regard him as having

done little wrong, if any; when they feel hostile, they take the opposite view. Again, if they are eager for, and have good hopes of, a thing that will be pleasant if it happens, they think that it certainly will happen and be good for them: whereas if they are indifferent or annoyed, they do not think so."

3   Interaction

Carolyn Handler Miller [11] indicates that there are only two possible ways for visitors to connect with content: interacting or watching it passively. By interacting, visitors becomes participants. "You can manipulate, explore, or influence it in one of a variety of ways. As the word 'interactive' indicates, it is an active experience. You are doing something" [11]. The sensation of being an active part of the process enhances the possibility of visitor engagement to any idea advocated by the website. The mere presence of interactive features indicates a disposition to transfer some control to the visitor, which may contribute to an overall friendliness.

The sense of participation is influenced by how much control visitors are convinced to have, that is, how much they feel that what happens on screen is a direct result of their inputs. Engagement can also be increased by promoting a sense of immersion in the piece. Using multimedia cues, such as sound and video, a website can go from resembling a document to be read, to simulating a space to be explored, something to be experienced. Immersive websites bring visitors into the action, the narrative, or the message. As pointed out by Miller [11], it is like, instead of merely watching a movie, becoming a character in it.

An important aspect to consider in immersive experiences is the choice of point of view (POV). There are two possible ways of experiencing interactive material: through first or third-person POV [11]. In the first-person POV, visitors look at the action as if really being there, that is, seeing through their own eyes. Visually, that is represented by the view of parts of the body, like arms and hands, the way a person usually sees them, and by movements that resemble the way heads usually move. The third-person POV shows facial expressions, which can be effective to communicate emotions, but hinders the sense of immersion.

4   Methodology

Several components are instrumental to the rhetoric of websites, like text, images, multimedia content, aesthetic appeal, technological refinement and usability. While using some of these elements as support for the analyses, this work concentrates on interactivity and its connection to the rhetorical appeal of pathos, that is, to emotions aroused in visitors.

The first step of the analysis is to identify the communicated function of the website, namely, what the website wants to achieve. The study of the function follows the methodology proposed by Foss [12], based on the piece's function as perceived by the critic, that is, the person conducting the analysis. Foss defends the use of the term function, rather than purpose, in order to dissociate the judgment from any possible intention of

the object's creator. In opposition to the intentionalist view, "which suggests that a creator's intentions are relevant to or determine the correct interpretation of a work", this methodology proposes that "a work, once done, stands independent of its production and the intentions of artists or creators are irrelevant to critics' responses to their works" [12]. The function considered in the analysis is not, then, the one intended by the creator but rather the one communicated by the object, as interpreted by the critic.

Having identified the communicated function, the analysis goes on to examine the interactive features of the website and their contribution to the engagement of visitors. The degree of engagement depends considerably on the perceived extent of control visitors have over what happens in the website. It may vary from having no control at all, as in non-interactive websites, to co-authorship, where visitors are active in the construction of the content.

The final step is to analyze how the interactive features of the website and the degree of engagement relate to the emotions of visitors, and how they support the fulfilment of the communicated function. Does the interaction induce fear? Tenderness? Laughter? Anger? How may these emotions lead to action, inspire reflection, change opinions? How does it contribute to the accomplishment of the website's goals?

5   Analysis

5.1   Pablo the Flamingo

Flamingos are endangered species, and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) receives donations, directed to worldwide conservation activities around the world, including preservation of these animals. One way of collecting donations is by selling "adopt a flamingo" kits, including items such as plush flamingos, photos and cards with species information. Art director Pascal Van der Haar, being an admirer of WWF efforts, decided to combine flamingo preservation with a project that experiments with code, illustration, animation and interaction. Along with illustrator Jono Yuen and developer Nathan Gordon [13], Van de Haar created Pablo the Flamingo (http://pablotheflamingo.com).

Instead of images of flamingos or information on endangered species, the website presented a fun way to connect with these animals. As the visitor enters the website, the loading page shows an egg with headphones, bouncing up and down, and the caption "turn up your sound…". After the page loads, we see Pablo, the flamingo, eyes closed, dancing to Eve's song "Let me blow ya mind" (Fig. 1). On the left side, there are three buttons: *sound off/on*, *share Pablo* (links to social media), and *adopt a flamingo* (leading to the WWF flamingo adoption store). If the visitor clicks on the first one, turning the music off, Pablo stops dancing, stares alarmed at the visitor and at the button, then reaches to the button with his beak and turns the music back on, resuming his dance moves (Fig. 2).

The main communicated function of the website is to promote donations, by generating an emotional response from the user. The main interactive feature here is turning the music off, which controls Pablo's reaction. Therefore, the visitor can interact directly with the character, in a playful way.

The turn-off/turn-in game visitors play with Pablo mimic repetitive games we play with pets, like throwing a ball so they can catch it again and again. This interaction

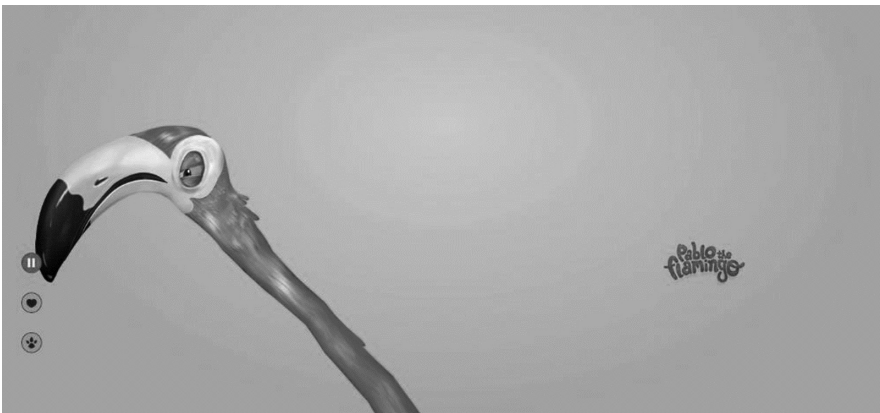**Fig. 1.** Pablo dancing (Source: pablotheflamingo.com)

Fig. 2. Pablo turning the music back on (Source: pablotheflamingo.com)

creates therefore a personal, emotional bond with a flamingo in a way we would have with a dog or a cat. This emotional connection stimulates the purchase of the adoption kit, fulfilling the website's function.

5.2 World Under Water

In May 2004, the U.S. Global Change Research Program (USGCRP) released the National Climate Assessment, a report that summarizes present and potential impacts of climate change on the United States. CarbonStory, a crowdfunding platform for projects that reduce or remove greenhouse gas emissions, commissioned BBDO and Proximity Singapore to create a website that would make the findings of the report more accessible and real for the public. The piece, World Under Water (http://worldunder-water.org), calls attention to the issue by showing what real places would look like if flooded by rising sea levels.

The website opens with a warning: "Sea levels are rising. Soon, climate change won't just affect people living in coastal regions, but each and every one of us. See the effect of global warming in your neighborhood" (Fig. 3).

It goes on, presenting images of twelve cities around the world: Singapore (Singapore), Kakamura (Japan), New York (USA), Yucatan (Mexico), Barcelona (Spain), Paris (France), Dubai (UAE), London (England), Brussels (Belgium), Copenhagen (Denmark), Rome (Italy), and Moscow (Russia). Each place appears as if the future effects from global warming presented in the report have taken place, that is, they appear to be flooded, deep in six feet of water (Fig. 4).

In the site footer, in the far right, there is a "take action" button, leading to three options: *Calculate your emissions*, *Offset your carbon footprint*, and *Support a green project*. In the footer center, a search field with the message: "Type to see any address under water" (Fig. 5) The visitor can enter any address, and the website will show images of it as if seen in Google Street View, flooded in the same way as the featured cities. If
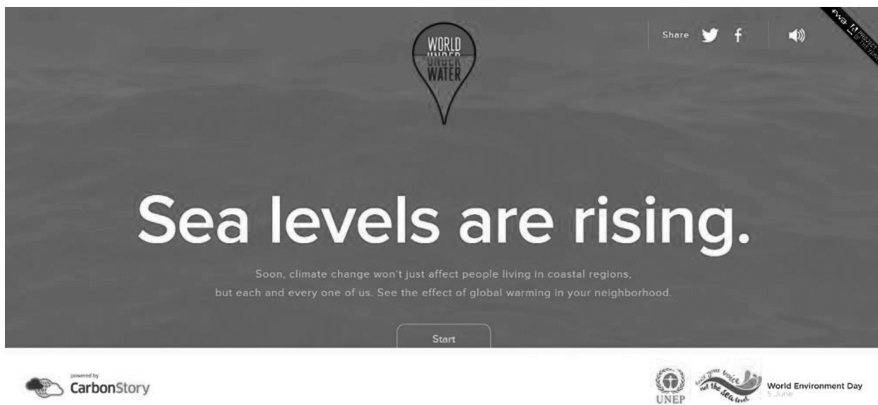

Fig. 3. Opening page, with warning (Source: worldunderwater.org)

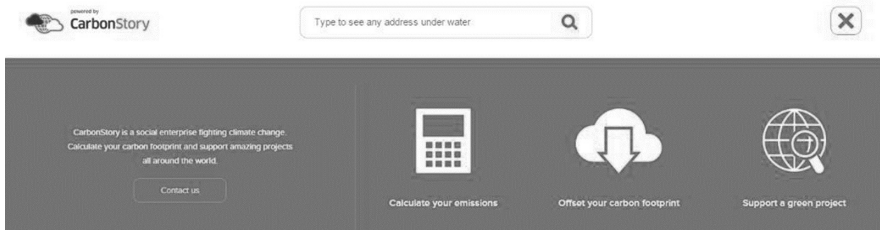**Fig. 4.** London under water (Source: worldunderwater.org)

Fig. 5. Website footer (Source: worldunderwater.org)

the entered address does not have a usable corresponding image from Street View, the website shows any working image within a larger radius from the initially searched-for location.

The website does not depict an accurate demonstration of what each city will look like if, as predicted, sea levels rise six feet in this century. It actually uses a sphere created with Three.js, where Google Street View images are stitched together and composed with simulated six feet of water. The site hacks into street view using WebGL, a JavaScript application program interface that renders three-dimensional graphics within browsers without installing plug-ins [14].

The main function communicated by the website is to lead visitors to take action against global warming, by inciting fear of its consequences. That is, its goal is, primarily, to make visitors aware of the problem, then make them afraid that it might affect their lives, and, finally, bring them into taking at least one of the suggested actions against global warming.

The main interactive features supporting these goals are the rotating view and the input of any address by the visitors. The Street-View-style feature of rotating the view around (sideways, upwards and downwards) enhances the feeling of reality and the sense of presence. Being able to look around makes the images more tangible than if they were static photographs. The possibility of entering any address to see under water brings the threat closer to visitors. If they can see their own house, it makes the danger seem more real and imminent for them than it could ever seem from simply reading a report. This way, the interactive features support the rhetorical strategy of focusing on the emotion of fear.

Aristotle [2] observes that, in order to provoke fear in the audience, it is important that they feel danger is close, that whatever the threat at hand, it can happen to them: "Of destructive or painful evils only; for there are some evils, e.g. wickedness or stupidity, the prospect of which does not frighten us: I mean only such as amount to great pains or losses. And even these only if they appear not remote but so near as to be imminent: we do not fear things that are a very long way off: for instance, we all know we shall die, but we are not troubled thereby, because death is not close at hand. From this definition it will follow that fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain. Hence the very indications of such things are terrible, making us feel that the terrible thing itself is close at hand; the approach of what is terrible is just what we mean by 'danger'."

5.3   Sortie en Mer

The website "Sortie en Mer" (http://sortieenmer.com) shows an interactive video that simulates the steps of drowning. It starts on a sailboat, in open sea, where two friends are talking. Julien gives Charles the control of the rudder, and then ends up falling off the boat. From the water, Julien asks for help, but the boat sails away. He finds himself in the water, alone and not wearing a life jacket (Fig. 6). A message shows up on the screen, telling visitors to scroll up (or swipe, if using a touch screen device) in order to stay on the water's surface (Fig. 7).

   If visitors do not scroll, Julien sinks and drowns. As long as they do, he stays afloat. Similarly to what would happen to someone in open sea, Julien goes through different struggles: he takes off his shoes in other to swim better and the cold water causes numb-

Fig. 6. Julien falls off the boat (Source: sortieenmer.com)

Fig. 7. "Scroll without stopping" (Source: sortieenmer.com)

ness to his limbs until a fingernail peels off (Fig. 8), exhaustion gives him hallucinations, from strange birds to rescue teams that never come (Fig. 9).

Nevertheless, the efforts of visitors, scrolling repeatedly, are in vain. After five minutes, even if there is no pause in scrolling, the man inevitably gets too tired, sinks to the bottom of the sea and drowns. A text appears on the screen stating for how long the struggle went on, and then the video ends with a message that explains the point of it all—"At sea, you tire faster than you think. Whenever you go out to sea, wear your life jacket"—, followed by the name Guy Cotten, a French company specializing in outdoor apparel and nautical safety gear.

The main goal of the video is to persuade people to wear a life jacket every time they go out to sea. The central message is that trying to keep the head above water is more tiresome than one might think, so wearing a life jacket may be the difference between

Fig. 8. Fingernail peels off (Source: sortieenmer.com)

Fig. 9. Hallucinations (Source: sortieenmer.com)

life and death. This is obviously related to the fact that a company that sells life jackets commissioned the piece.

Throughout the whole video, visitors have a first-person POV, even during hallucinations, enhancing the connection with the man's struggles. The sense of participation is also physical, since visitors control, by scrolling or swiping, if the character stays on the surface. The interaction connects their real physical actions and the character's virtual movements, making visitors actually feel tired. The immersive storytelling creates a connection between that physical tiredness and possible consequences of being exhausted while at sea.

The appeal of the video is essentially emotional, evoking feelings in order to persuade. The main argument—that it is important to wear a life jacket—is not made by convincing that Guy Cotten is a respectable and efficient company, that sells well-made safety gear (which would be ethos), nor by listing logical reasons why a person needs help to float on open sea (which would be logos). Here, visitors are influenced by the emotions they feel: fear of being left behind, physical exhaustion of fighting to stay afloat, shock of watching fingernails peel off, frustration of sinking no matter how hard you try to avoid it, resignation of inescapable death. Emotions make the experience more immersive and compelling, increasing the connection between user and message.

6   Conclusion

If last century was the age of persuasion through texts and images, this century looks as if it is going to be the time of digital media rhetoric. The way visitors interact with digital content influence its apprehension and its impact, working in a rhetorical fashion. The investigation of rhetorical possibilities of interaction is relevant for researchers, in order to advance the field, not only theoretically, but also when it comes to practical applications, broadening capabilities of interface designers as to building arguments. The analysis of websites can be an instrument for establishing a framework for evaluating digital pieces within a rhetorical perspective, thus contributing to an emerging theory of interaction rhetoric.

Concepts established in classical rhetoric can be the basis for such analyses, providing some guidance when it comes to establishing parameters of investigation. The Aristotelian appeals—ethos, logos and pathos—present an interesting possibility of identifying different strategies, focusing on character, logic or emotions. By concentrating on each one separately, analyses can recognize more clearly the roles played by interactive features in the rhetorical plan.

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