
Originally published in Story circle: digital storytelling around the world, Chapter 20, pp. 269-278


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Beyond Individual Expression: Creative Tools, Systems and Teams
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21 September 2007

For submission to “Story Circle: Digital Storytelling around the World”

Introduction
The digital storytelling genre originated by the Center for Digital Storytelling trains citizens to create their own story, in their own voice, without interference from media professionals. We suggest that the genre is a reactive – rather than interactive – medium whose strength lies in its prescriptive format. This format provides a method and tools to support the individual creative process. However, this emphasis on individual expression may limit the sustainability of the genre. Using examples of community co-creation and distribution projects, we argue that a strategic team-based approach to participatory content creation may provide a more sustainable approach for communities and organisations engaged in this kind of collaboration.

Interactive or reactive?
The application of communication technology to provide an interactive media space created and populated by citizenry is an ongoing process. Amateur radio; citizens’ band; community media; citizen journalism; and social media are just some of many examples of participatory communication and content creation. Should digital stories sit within this genealogy?

The term ‘digital storytelling’ can be applied to many narrative forms including hypertext, interactive stories, and computer games (Wu 2005). This chapter uses the term to describe the format popularised by the Center of Digital Storytelling (CDS). Using the CDS definition, a digital story might fit the description of a home-made video more closely than that of an interactive medium. It is a three-minute mini-movie made by non-professionals which uses images and a narrated voice-over. It is a personal story; conceived, written, edited and narrated by the storyteller – apparently free from any interference from media professionals. It is a work of individual creativity; a one-way communication destined for viewing by a limited audience of the storyteller’s family and friends. At least, this seems to be the case for the substantial digital storytelling programs at the CDS and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI). To date, very few of the stories made by workshop participants at these centres are available on the respective organisations’ websites. A wider audience can usually only watch these stories if the creator chooses to upload to YouTube or similar. So far, the distinguishing features of a digital story could be applied to a wedding video. But there’s at least one big difference in terms of production: we don’t need a video camera to make a digital story. Our family photo-albums provide more than enough memories and materials to create this unique form of ‘scrapbook TV’. That is, as long as we have access to a scanner; personal computer; photo manipulation and video editing applications. And someone to teach us how to use them.

Fortunately there are some online digital story collections, which may lead us towards a definition of digital storytelling as an interactive medium. The BBC’s Capture Wales project features a substantial collection of digital stories created in workshops by community participants and accessible by an online audience via the project website. Perhaps this portal constitutes an interactive medium? The visitor to the site can browse, point and click; and also has the facility to
‘have a say’ by typing a comment into a text box; on condition that “The BBC reserves the right to select and edit comments”. Yet this level of interaction with the digital collection is relatively poor in comparison to the complex many-to-many interactivity afforded by social utility and networking sites such as Facebook and Flickr. If an interaction system is one “in which both actor and reactor are engaged in a mutually affecting experience” (Shedroff 2001), then we can echo Kidd’s view (2005) to suggest that the Capture Wales portal is another example of “reactive” rather than “interactive” technology (Williams 1974).

If the stories themselves are one-way communications – and if examples of online collections do seem to behave rather more reactively than interactively – then perhaps digital storytelling is interactive at the interface between the storyteller and the cultural sphere during the creative process? Is the very act of creating one’s own digital story, free from censorship or interference, an interaction with the cultural or even political sphere? Arguably not. Workshops guide participants to originate a personal story from personal memories; rather than respond to an ongoing debate. They are not meant as a direct contribution to a conversation; neither do they invite an immediate response or dialogue. “In this sense the workshops represent one-off interactions that can have no real lasting impact upon the ‘media’ as we know it. They do not leave a more democratic media system in their wake” (Kidd 2005).

Interactivity is an evolving concept. In the days when the World Wide Web was little more than a twinkle in the eye of Tim Berners-Lee, some first-time PC users were very unfamiliar with the idea of a PC application ‘interacting’ with a user in the form of simple instructions or requests via monologue and dialogue boxes. Some decades later, an online PC is not considered interactive unless it simultaneously offers user-generated content; bitstreamed video; live social networking; and automated external defibrillation (for the more extreme immersive games). If we widen our consideration of interactivity beyond the interface to include participatory content creation, even a brief visit to YouTube demonstrates the diversity of user-generated content – when it is produced outside of a prescriptive storytelling format. YouTube also shows that an amateur wedding video featuring Michael Jackson’s Thriller soundtrack has amassed over 3 million hits at time of writing. In comparison to this level of interactivity, digital storytelling may perhaps fall short. We propose that one of its great strengths comes from the very fact that it is a prescriptive, even a restrictive co-creative format.

**Creative tools and systems**

Digital stories are individual expressions which largely rest in post-production isolation. By perusing the impressive collection on the Capture Wales site, we may detect that these stories are not made free from interference. There is little to no profanity, nudity, violence; these stories have been made within creative restrictions and preset themes, with varying degrees of input from workshop trainers. Perhaps the effectiveness of digital storytelling – and those genres evolving from it – derives from the restrictions it places on the co-creative process. A short script and an emphasis on using still images rather than video makes both the writing and editing processes more achievable. Copyright restrictions inhibit the addition of commercial music as a soundtrack, simplifying the audio mix. A limited workshop duration applies the time pressure that provides momentum to complete a creative product: “What can be considered a hindrance, for example time pressure, can be considered by others to be a facilitator (the ironically positive effects of an impending deadline)” (Nakakoji et al 2006).

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1 http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/audiovideo/sites/galleries/pages/capturewales.shtml on 06 Sep 2007
2 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPmYbP0F4ZW
The consideration of creativity is increasingly important within interaction design circles, within which it has been acknowledged for some years that “One of the most important skills for almost everyone to have in the next decade and beyond will be those that allow us to create valuable, compelling, and empowering information and experiences for others. To do this, we must learn existing ways of organizing and presenting data and information and develop new ones” (Shedroff 1999). Traditional approaches to the study of interaction design emphasise the role of the individual user in overall system design and performance. However, the ongoing move to Web 2.0 products and systems challenges interaction designers and content creators to consider the needs and behaviours of communities of users. If we agree that “the new computing is about supporting human relationships” and “participating in knowledge communities” (Shneiderman 2002) then it’s not difficult to imagine how digital storytelling can play a role in the new paradigm by providing a creative process for cultural participation by communities: “Stories put us in touch with ourselves, others, and our surroundings. Using innovations in multimedia technology, students and adult audiences can make personal connections... through new ways of storytelling” (Springer et al. 2004). The digital storytelling workshop provides a toolkit with which participants can use digital media to achieve creative outcomes. This kit provides:

- “tools to train people to develop creativity, or skills of creative thinking”;
- “tools to support people's creative process while engaging in a creation task”;
- “tools to enable people to have new kinds of experiences that they would not be able to have without using these tools... [to] allow people to engage in completely new experiences of producing expressions” (Nakakoji 2005).

During this consideration of the importance of user communities, we may also wish to reflect upon the limitations of a workshop structure that emphasises individual creativity. If we are trying to achieve sustainable community creative processes, then we can observe that ongoing creative practice is achieved by teams rather than individuals: composer & lyricist; director & cinematographer; art director & copywriter. Digital storytelling initiatives have also been criticised for emphasising the tools of individual creativity at the expense of systematic considerations, particularly content distribution: “issues such as the distribution of content in a participatory environment, as well as media skills dissemination and narrative structure are yet to be fully thought out” (Rennie 2004). This discussion now turns to other initiatives which incorporate systematic considerations such as distribution and program sustainability as part of wider content-based community co-creation initiatives. These initiatives have moved beyond the traditional individual expression of digital storytelling to focus instead on the team-based co-creation of microdocumentaries.

**Digital Clubhouse**

The Digital Clubhouse network was founded in 1996 as a place where people of all ages and backgrounds could share life experiences and/or technological expertise. A program of intergenerational storytelling program uses microdocumentary production to encourage community members to capture and share dreams, memories, thoughts and histories in a collaborative environment. Since 1998 the program has focused on *Stories of Service*, an initiative in which young people work with seniors to tell veterans’ stories of serving their country. The storytelling aspect of the program is based on the CDS model, whereby participants attend creative workshops to train in writing and multimedia production. But the workshop’s emphasis is on creative teamwork rather than individual expression. Veterans and young people working together to produce a microdocumentary based on a veteran’s personal experience, rather than an individual artistic expression. Through *Stories of Service* and its other community storytelling programs, Digital Clubhouse has achieved a comprehensive and sustainable strategy that encompasses:

- A sustained digital literacy and networking program for under-represented youth.
• Project management, writing, interviewing, and research skills for young people.
• An avenue for veteran communities to share personal stories.
• A platform for sustained intergenerational storytelling.

Participants are sought from public schools within New York borough, with emphasis on Spanish, African American and Asian communities. Through workshops, these participants have access to high-end computers (rarely seen within their own communities) and are trained to create microdocumentaries while receiving skills, credit, recognition and mentoring while focussing on preserving community stories. The training curriculum is mapped to national US school standards. The creative outputs of the program are shared with the community, and/or become part of participants’ college applications. This ability to distribute creative output is of great importance to program participants. To that end, Digital Clubhouse works with a number of distribution outlets:
• Local communities through screenings and dedicated events i.e. Veteran’s Day.
• Online (both within Digital Clubhouse’s bespoke online theatre and on other sites).
• Cable television: History Channel and website.
• Local terrestrial television and affiliates.
• Various museum organisations.

Through the Stories of Service program, veterans share their memories and histories with other members of the community in a very personal way. By working with them creatively, young people are encouraged to develop a sense of civic engagement and responsibility, alongside digital literacy skills. Program leaders are proactive in providing opportunities through which various components of the community come together, either in the production of the stories or the presentation of the stories at community events. These events have attracted civic leaders, businesses, civic groups, veterans groups, schools, and museums; thereby providing valuable social networking opportunities for participants and community alike. This coherent strategy demonstrates the potential for microdocumentary production to operate as a key element within a wider system for community engagement and interaction via content co-creation and distribution. This essential strategic consideration is also evident in Wu’s proposal for a commercial digital storytelling derivative for use in cultural tourism, which emphasises the importance of content distribution (2005).

**Community co-creation**

Such innovative creative engagement between an organisation and the community has been described using the term ‘co-creativity’. Co-creative technologies are describes as those that offer assistance in the creation process: “People are naturally creative and are almost always more interested in experiences that allow them to create instead of merely participate” (Shedroff 1999). Although there may be some question as to just how many people are “naturally creative”, this basic position is key to the concept of everyday creative participation.

Much of our own work has focused on the design of co-creative systems for enhanced interaction between cultural institutions and communities of interest. Digital media are becoming more prevalent in major libraries, galleries and museums. It’s even been suggested by humanities commentators that information and communication technology (ICT) is now so deeply embedded in our daily lives – at home, work and school – that in many places it is shaping a “new landscape of communication” and “new learning environments” (Nixon 2003). Putting aside the observation that the latest communication technologies have been shaping such a landscape and environment since the printing press, questions remain as to whether cultural institutions are using this technology to better represent the needs of the community they serve; or to simply solidify existing top-down curatorial practice. The digital storytelling experiments by both ACMI and the BBC are good examples of a community-focused co-creation program. In Australia, the State Library of
Queensland’s Mobile Multimedia Laboratory (MML) project is designed to widen and deepen the sharing of cultural knowledge by creating a platform for content creation by communities of interest. The MML is a fully portable digital toolkit which allows Library trainers to travel within the enormous state of Queensland in order to train communities in digital literacy skills. These regional sessions include community training in use of internet, and skills upgrade workshops for regional library staff. The Library provides the MML and support staff to communities who have particular events or histories to record, as part of its Queensland Stories project. Community participants learn to prepare a short multimedia narrative based on the three-minute digital storytelling format (although not necessarily recounting a personal revelation). The finished stories are published on the Library’s website for viewing by an online audience (Watkins & Russo 2005a).

The Australian Museum is one of a number of cultural institutions exploring innovative forms of community co-creation as part of the New Literacy, New Audiences research project. The Museum is very involved in informal learning programs: its own studies suggest that communication with communities of interest requires more than just efficient information transfer mechanisms; and learning messages can be enhanced through use of narrative, storytelling and the human face (as opposed to the anonymous graphics panel so prevalent in museum exhibitions). Therefore the Museum decided to experiment with narrative-based co-creative production. It was recognised at the start of the pilot that a successful and sustainable implementation of co-creative social media could not be purchased and plugged-in, but rather would require organisational buy-in and change, from both top-down and the bottom-up. In response, a strategic decision was made to train staff teams from across the Museum in microdocumentary production, derived from the digital storytelling format. This decision was based partly upon the significant adoption of new communication technologies by museums in recent years. It is believed that such technologies will enable audiences and communities of interest to interact more directly with the museum; its knowledge bases and collections; and the information and issues which surround them (Watkins & Russo 2007). Experiments with media tools such as blogs, podcasts and microdocumentaries within the cultural sector demonstrate that such tools can allow individualised meaning-making, leading to nuanced interpretation of cultural content – enhanced and/or encouraged by networked conversations (Fisher & Twiss-Garrity 2007). A rising number of museums, galleries and libraries worldwide are experimenting with digital content creation activities not only as a route to increased visitation rates, but also as a means by which to strengthen community relationships on the basis that “cultural products or activities create audiences as people engage with them” (Gillard 2002). The content creation program developed for the Australian Museum trains a three-person team of writer, producer and editor to produce an original microdocumentary. A close creative collaboration is essential to devise and deliver the finished item within an accelerated two-day schedule. Although off-the-shelf creative applications are a feature of the workshop, its focus is firmly on team-based digital content creation techniques, rather than individual expression. Partly due to this focus, the Museum has established a core team of content creators after only two training workshops. This team has already successfully completed a number of microdocumentary co-creation projects with external communities. The Museum will expand its participatory content creation strategy in line with the implementation of a redesigned website with Web 2.0 functionality.

It should be noted that community content creation is not a new field of study. Since the 1960s, cultural institutions in the USA and UK have broadened their public programs to include community interaction with content through education (Vergo 1993). In 1994, Schuler argued that communities were distinguished by lively interaction and engagement on issues of mutual concern and that their well-being contributes to the well-being of the state as a whole (1994). He proposed

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3 http://nlablog.wordpress.com/
that ICT could play a role in community life by improving communication, economic opportunity, civic participation and education. His position extended to community-oriented electronic communication where community networks have a local focus. However, whilst communities are beginning to interact with cultural institutions, the artefacts they create are not usually collected, registered and archived within an institution’s collection. Therefore community interaction has been restricted to entertaining ways of ‘making meaning’ from existing content; without providing an avenue for the collection and distribution of artefacts created through this interaction. This limits the long-term value of community interaction with content. But the relationship between institution and community has a far greater potential than the one-way provision of access and facilities. The digitally literate community not only has the tools to consume digital culture, it can also work with the institution to create its own digital artefacts. This relationship underpins the process of community co-creation. When community co-creation programs – like those by the State Library of Queensland or the Australian Museum – include preservation and distribution strategies for traditional forms such as community narratives, they present an opportunity for communities of interest to preserve their stories and distribute cultural knowledge to a wider audience. In framing the development of projects and strategies, it will be important to consider the changes which digital media bring to modes of content production, consumption and interaction. This holds implications for the different types of cultural artefacts for display and preservation as well as the new skills required by professionals to enable community interaction (Watkins & Russo 2005b).

Summary

Digital storytelling is a prescriptive method that privileges individual expression. The genre “has its roots in community arts and oral history; it stretches from pre-literate cultural traditions” (Meadows 2003). Perhaps this community arts heritage prevents digital storytelling practitioners from realising the potential for distribution and genuine interaction offered by Web 2.0 platforms and co-creative philosophies. Those organisations which integrate key elements of the digital storytelling format within a wider participatory content creation system may well achieve a more sustainable and widespread interaction with their target communities.

Initiatives by Digital Clubhouse, the State Library of Queensland and the Australian Museum have replaced the personal stories of traditional digital storytelling with a team-based microdocumentary approach. These initiatives mark an important new phase in online interaction between cultural institutions and communities of interest (Russo & Watkins 2007). It may be argued by adherents of the traditional form that a ‘real’ digital story is a revelatory narrative about the storyteller. However, this prescriptive view may contradict the ambition of digital storytelling to equip the creator to tell the story of his/her own choice. We look forward to the ongoing and sustainable evolution of the microdocumentary form at the hands of communities of interest worldwide.

References


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