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The Story So Far…
Digital Storytelling, Narrative and the New Literacy

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Abstract

This paper will explore the narrative possibilities of digital media production as well as the changing relationship between the producer and the people/experiences they seek to represent. It will focus upon the *Digital Storytelling* form and discuss why it has been adopted by QUT as a research applications project.

Digital Storytelling was developed by the late Dana Atchley (the *Centre for Digital Storytelling*, Berkeley) and Daniel Meadows (BBC *Capture Wales*). A digital story is something personal, generated from photo-albums and people's memories. In the UK, the stories are created in a 5 day workshop and shown on the BBC's *Capture Wales* website and digital television channel. 250 words is the expected length totalling no more than 3 minutes. Meadows writes, 'These strictures, I find, make for elegance. Digital Stories are a bit like sonnets in this respect, multimedia sonnets from the people (only it's probably better when they don't rhyme)'.

Digital storytelling is part of a 'new literacy' – a means to speak and write within the digital environment. For the storyteller, the creative journey is made achievable by the process and format. When the stories are viewed together they form a greater whole, exposing a place and time. The narrative therefore works at different levels: the individual story, the collective (website) and as short pieces that can be made into television content. This paper will explore the way in which individual narratives produced by non-professionals can be up-scaled to become more than the sum of their parts and the opportunities this presents for new media production.

We will also discuss the role of the producer/expert in this process. For Meadows – a documentary photographer – digital storytelling was a chance to help people tell their own stories instead of being merely represented by the artist. He has moved from

'capturing' English life to become a teacher, curator and designer. The documentary-maker's purpose (representing ordinary life and issues) does not disappear in the digital storytelling environment but shifts from an author-based vision to the structuring, selecting and distributing of others' experiences.

During the presentation of the paper we will screen a selection of digital stories.

Paper

The digital storytelling workshop began with a punk haiku poem, recited by our teacher, Daniel Meadows:

Writing a poem

In seventeen syllables

Is very diffic [1]

Digital stories are a kind of poetry, created and delivered using multimedia. Anyone can learn how to make a digital story – it is less 'diffic' than you might think – as long as a few simple rules are followed. 250 words is the expected script length, totalling no more than 3 minutes. Stories need to be personal, generated from photo-albums and memories. The images are made move to the rhythm of the voice-over and special effects should be kept to a minimum. 'These strictures, I find, make for elegance', says Meadows[2].

Digital storytelling presents a way forward for media production now struggling with its own participatory possibilities. People everywhere are making media but our industries and institutions don't always know what to make of it. The content that emerges from amateur efforts often fails to meet the expectations of audiences now skilled at reading sophisticated media narratives and attune to high production values. From the consumption side, the rise of reality television and interactivity demonstrate a growing interest in programs focused on the self and that enable audience involvement. But such developments in the professional media rarely show the complexity of what it is to be an 'ordinary person'. As one commentator expressed it, reality TV 'makes us all arseholes'[3]. What looks like a misrepresentation of humanity is also a crisis in media production. How can the professional media make use of people's desire to produce and to see themselves (or ordinary folk) in the media? How can reality inputs be made voluntary, useful and creative for the people involved? How can individual stories be up-scaled to become part of larger narratives with broad appeal?

Digital storytelling begins to answer these questions. Also implicit within it are the themes of participation and representation – what it might mean to live in a society where self-expression through the media is possible. That is an issue of democracy, in the pursuit of which much media studies work has been written. But right now we are

concerned with the opportunities for media (although if you choose to draw some conclusions about the state of democracy, feel free to do so).

The journey

Daniel Meadows arrived at digital storytelling by bus. In the 1970s he travelled throughout Britain in a converted double-decker, asking people if he could take their photo. He managed to collect a large archive by offering his subjects a free copy of their portrait if they showed up the following day. The pictures remain an intriguing insight into working-class Britain and helped confirm his status as an expert documentary photographer[4]. Twenty five years later, Meadows wanted to photograph the same people again, but first he had to find them:

> "In the summer of 1995 while reshooting the 'bootboys' picture, one of them - Phil Tickle - had taken a heartfelt swipe at my documentary methodology. He was outraged by the process I had used for tracing him - publishing his picture in a local newspaper - explaining that it had unfairly exposed him in the close-knit community of his home town, Barrow-in-Furness. I had no business dropping into his life uninvited and so publicly, he said. And he was right"[5].

Meadows decided to seek out a process through which he could pursue his practice that 'would allow Phil to make his own media, rather than have it done to him' and that might produce a story 'unlike any that ever was told'[6]. He discovered digital storytelling, originally conceived by the late Dana Atchley of the *Centre for Digital Storytelling* in Berkeley[7]. The BBC hopped on board, providing Meadows with the means to conduct free workshops in villages and towns throughout Wales. The stories are available to watch on the *Capture Wales* website[8] and are shown in 5 minute slots on the BBC's digital television channel.

The individual stories are nicely-crafted amateur films that use photographs as their primary visual element. Their simplicity is achieved by the format, which keeps them aesthetically succinct and uniquely personal. Together, the stories form a picture of a time and a place, a historical record. The collective story of *Capture Wales* has themes of hardship, growing up, belonging and belongings (see story 'Pink Laydee'[9] about Jessica's fascination with the colour pink, or 'A Quest For Understanding' on shoe addiction[10]). Although the stories are written and spoken by the participants, the larger narrative owes much to the format. That innovation belongs to Meadows. It is a device that makes use of the unknown, offering an opportunity for new stories and uses to emerge, yet intuitive in its ability to bring out the important things.

How did digital storytelling arrive in Brisbane? Professor John Hartley had been following Photobus since working with Meadows at Cardiff University. Hartley

recognised within the stories of *Capture Wales* a strong element of what he has called 'read-write' culture. By this he means

the popular audience is achieving a '*read and write*' capacity in publicly distributed media, via their participation in shows like *Big Brother*; and in private communication, where digital equipment for making audio-visual texts and messages is close to achieving the banal and autonomous status of the pen[11].

Digital storytelling also presented an opportunity to explore what has been called the 'pro-am' (professional-amateur) dimensions of the creative industries[12], whereby creativity that exists outside of formal industry structures may inform or produce cultural and economic outcomes. Meadows came to QUT in April 2004 to train a group of researchers to make digital stories and to discuss his method and motivations. The group is now beginning to explore – through both practice and theory – the ways in which digital storytelling is not only symptomatic of changes in the consumption and production of media but instrumental in directing those shifts.

Get real

For much of its history, community-based media has overlooked its own qualifications in producing and assisting self-expression of the type that digital storytelling offers. Instead it preferred to describe itself in oppositional terms; as retaliation against the mainstream media, a means to disrupt private ownership and control structures and as a community development tool. Access, it was also argued, would enable new voices to make it into the public sphere, resulting in a more diverse society. Little was said about audiences. As a whole, community-based media was strong in ideals, messy in content (not unlike participatory democracy, for those of you still reading between the lines). Some of its achievements are known only to a small number of enthusiasts (ham radio, for instance) while others have gained widespread recognition through their down-to-earth approach (3RRR in Melbourne).

Diversity did result from community media, but on the whole it was less radical than expected[13]. The implication of the 'access' approach to community radio and television meant that conservative communities were given a voice too. The democratic quality of community media continues to reside in its display of existing society – sometime strange, sometimes mundane and full of surprises – rather than any revolutionary quality that its advocates had hoped for. It managed to demystify media production and content, bringing everyday faces and issues to our attention, even ones we didn't like. It was refreshingly real and local.

Largely because of the way it described itself, community media was ignored by the vast majority of media commentators and intellectuals. Those concerned with the political economy of the media saw community media as too small-scale to have any real impact upon ownership and control issues. A few were outright scornful of 'video freaks'[14],

seeing them as a threat to quality broadcasting. The postmodernists and textual analysts didn't bother to read anything into it. Although media studies was interested in how 'the ordinary world' was depicted in the media by professionals such as Meadows, it paid little attention to amateur media production.

With the rise of the Internet, media 'from below' became unavoidable. The old separation between community media and popular media that scholars and practitioners on both sides have kept apart for so long has now begun to diminish. The community media advocates were right about a few things too; in particular their claim that consumers would want to become producers if given half a chance. The assumption that audiences would want to watch ordinary people being themselves on television also eventuated. But the winning formula was to focus on self-conflict rather than issues, and it came from the commercial media in the form of reality TV. Whether stranded on desert islands or locked in a house, watching lives being performed was intensely interesting[15].

We cannot assume that all of these developments are entirely positive or even that they are fully realised. Amateur production has transformed the media to a large extent, as demonstrated by the hoards of open source coders who helped make the Internet what it is today[16]. But 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. It appears that developments occurring in media are as much about literacy as they are about innovation or entertainment. If a computer or a camera is as accessible as a pen, how do we learn to write? Who teaches us? Where do we publish?

The production industries are largely still figuring out their response to these questions. The starting point is to develop new narrative forms that incorporate complex audience involvement. For Meadows, digital storytelling has been a chance to get people telling their own stories instead of being represented by the artist. He has moved from 'capturing' English life to become a teacher, curator and designer. For the BBC, digital storytelling is 'interactive' television that reaches beyond the basic feed-back activities usually associated with the term. They seem to be on to something.

The CIRAC[17] Digital Storytelling project will pursue this further. We plan to prototype different narrative and technical forms of digital storytelling, explore issues of distribution (how stories can be gathered from disparate applications or individual creators), survey the existing genres of digital storytelling and develop manuals and portals to build upon the process. The intention is to construct order within a commons-style field of production. Theoretically, CIRAC will look at digital storytelling as literacy, as cultural utility and in relation to the citizen-consumer. We will investigate the convergence of community-based participation and the popular media, examining the industrial and educational implications as well as the deployment of community-based media for development. At its core, this means understanding how new media fits within the history of literacy.

In that first Brisbane workshop, seven people were taught how to make digital stories. Learning in a group meant there was an ever-present audience, a reminder that each story

would be screened. Ellie Rennie constructed a comedy about her alternative schooling. Sandra made a story in which she was a monster looking at her own life. Patrick's was about being the seventh child of nine, where 'middle-child syndrome took on massive proportions'. Our stories were more varied than we had expected but they still sat nicely as a collection. We were happy with what we had produced and so were the audience.

In summary: the sum and its parts

As with democracy, when people are inadequately represented, both society and the self suffer. Narratives – national and cultural – seem out of touch with everyday reality and we (the citizenry) feel as though we don't have a say[18]. What digital storytelling does best is to build personal stories and present them in such a way as to expose the bigger picture. There is something profound in the possibility of seeing the collective interest uncovered through its parts. Representation is deduced from a visible reality rather than being a poor attempt to summarise it. Why is this lesson important for the professional media? As with politics, if people are not fairly represented they will become apathetic or seek other means of getting their opinion across. The professional media need to come to terms with their role in public life if they are to remain relevant.

Digital storytelling is still in the process of dealing with its own case of 'middle-child syndrome'. It currently sits somewhere between the distinct spheres of popular and community media. It will be interesting to see what happens when digital storytelling makes its way into other areas - from classrooms, to travel agents, even into funeral parlours. We suspect that it is the ordinary spaces that will become the ones to watch.

Notes

[1] Haiku by John Cooper Clarke

[2] http://www.photobus.co.uk/dstory_01.html. See also Daniel Meadows (2003), 'Digital Storytelling: research-based practice in new media', *Visual Communication*, Vol 2(2), pp. 189—193.

[3] TISM lyric, quoted in *The Australian,* 'Is the Joke On Us?' by Kerry Murphy, 07/08/04, B34

[4] Daniel Meadows (2001), *The Bus*, The Harvill Press: London.

[5] http://www.photobus.co.uk/philthom.html#

[6] Ibid.

[7] http://www.storycenter.org

[8] http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales/

[9] http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales/background/jessica-jones.shtml

[10] http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales/background/richard-pugh.shtml

[11] John Hartley (2004), 'The Value Chain of Meaning and the New Economy', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol 7, p. 136.

[12] See Charles Leadbeatter (2003) 'Amateurs: A 21st-Century Remake', *RSA Journal*, Issue 5507, pp. 22—5.

[13] See Ellie Rennie (2003) '"Trespassers are Welcome": Access and Community Television Policy', *Javnost (The Public)*, Vol. X, 1, pp. 49—62.

[14] Nicholas Garnham (1990), *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information*, Sage: London, p. 68.

[15] See John Hartley, '"Kiss Me Kat": Shakespeare, *Big Brother* and the taming of the self', *Reality TV: Re-making Television Culture,* S. Murray and L. Ouellette (eds.), New York University Press: New York, 303—322.

[16] See Ellie Rennie and Sherman Young (2004), 'Park Life: The commons and communications policy', *Virtual Nation: The Internet in Australia*, G. Goggin (ed.), UNSW Press: Sydney, pp. 242—257.

[17] Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre, QUT.

[18] See also Ellie Rennie and John Hartley (2004) 'Show-business for Ugly People: Media politics and e-democracy', paper presented at *The Australian e-Governance Conference 2004*, Melbourne University. http://www.public-policy.unimelb.edu.au/egovernance/ConferenceContent.html

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About the Authors

Ellie Rennie is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow Queensland University of Technology investigating community broadcasting (see articles published in *Australian Journal of Communications, Media International Australia* and *Javnost: The Public)* and innovation of cultural forms (with John Hartley). Ellie is currently co-Vice Chair of the Community Communications section of the International Association of Media Communication Research.

John Hartley is world authority in media, cultural and journalism studies. He is a Professor in the Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre and former Dean of the Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology. He is the author of many books and articles, including *A Short History of Cultural Studies* (Sage, 2003)*, The Indigenous Public Sphere* (with Alan McKee, Oxford, 2000)*, Uses of Television* (Routledge, 1999)*, Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture* (Arnold, 1996). He is Editor of the prestigious *International Journal of Cultural Studies* and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

The digital story is a short person-al narrative involving images (stills, video, graphics), a narrated voiceover, and a recorded audio sound track (see Kajder 2004; Lambert 2010; McGeoch 2010; Ohler 2008; Robin 2008). Originating in 1994 at the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California, digital storytell-ing evolved around co-founder Lam-bertâ€™s thoughts about telling stories and sharing feelings in conjunction with his seven steps of the digital story (2010).Â Intonation â€" The voice stirs an emotional response that matches the story line.Â Digital storytelling in the classroom: New media pathways to literacy, learning, and creativity. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Robin, B. R. 2008. Digital Storytelling and Multimodal Literacy in Education.Â Educational storytelling however, is far more complex than what it may seem when looking at these lists of elements for two main reasons: a) when used, EDS becomes part of the curriculum and should therefore be evaluated; b) students are learners and they may not only need instruction (cf. Wikan et al., 2010) on the technology of DS, but also on each and every one of the elements of digital stories. As Paul & Fiebich (2005) explain, communication takes place in a multimodal environment, which is distinct and unique when compared to previous media.Â Both the process of elaborating the story and the story itself are important when using digital storytelling in the classroom. The New Digital Storytelling is aimed at creators and would-be practitioners, first of allpeople who want to tell stories with digital technologies for the first time, those who are already using digital tools and want to try new approaches, storytellers using nondigital means (like voice or print) who seek to cross the analogdigital divide.Â Chapters 2 and 3 then survey the digital storytelling ancestry, the two generations of computing and narrative practice preceding our time. The second part of this book surveys the current state of the digital storytelling art. Request PDF | On Jan 1, 2004, John Hartley and others published The Story So Far: Digital Storytelling, Narrative and the New Literacy | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate.Â Now audiences are turning increasingly to entertainment, reality TV and celebrities, and losing interest in both politicians and the news. How can governments fulfil the publicâ€™s need for leadership? The shift towards private life may provide the answers that e-government has been looking for. We argue that e-government initiatives are unlikely to succeed in overcoming political apathy until they produce narratives relevant to contemporary culture. 1. View.