



Part I

What Is Digital Storytelling?





Computational Power Meets Human Contact

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Everyone loves a story. Not everyone loves a computer. “Digital storytelling” is a workshop-based practice in which people are taught to use digital media to create short audio-video stories, usually about their own lives. The idea is that this puts the universal human delight in narrative and self-expression into the hands of everyone. It brings a timeless form into the digital age, to give a voice to the myriad tales of everyday life as experienced by ordinary people in their own terms. Despite its use of the latest technologies, its purpose is simple and human.

The late Dana Atchley developed “digital storytelling” in California in the early to mid-1990s, with his partner Denise Aungst (later Atchley), with Joe Lambert and his partner Nina Mullen, and with programmer Patrick Milligan (Lambert 2006: 8–10). Although digital videos existed before that time in various forms, they were overwhelmingly the productions of experts – digital artists and filmmakers, for the most part. Atchley’s innovation was to develop an exportable workshop-based approach to teach “ordinary” people – from school students to the elderly, with or (usually) without knowledge of computers or media production – how to produce their own personal videos. But despite the term “digital” in digital storytelling, the emphasis is on the *story* and the *telling*. Workshops typically commence with narrative and expressive “limbering-up” exercises, designed to loosen up everyone’s storytelling capabilities. This feature is called the *story circle* – hence the title of this book. It may include verbal games, making lists (loves and hates), and writing make-believe scenarios, as well as scripting what will become each person’s own story. The idea is not only to tap into people’s implicit narrative skills, but also to focus on the telling, by prompting participants to share their ideas, and to do so spontaneously, quickly, and in relation to all

sorts of nonsense as well as to the matter at hand. Thus, although individual stories can often be confessional, moving, and express troubles as well as triumphs, the process of making them can be noisy, fun, and convivial.

While the practice developed as a response to the exclusion of “ordinary” people’s stories in broadcast media, it was facilitated by the increasing accessibility of digital media to home users, with digital cameras, scanners, and personal computers all becoming increasingly accessible to the domestic market in the 1990s. Digital storytelling also emerged as part of broader cultural shifts, including a profound change in models of media communication. As contemporary societies move from manufacturing industry to knowledge-based service economies, the entire array of large-scale and society-wide communication is undergoing a kind of paradigm shift, across the range of entertainment, business, and citizenship. Changing technologies and consumer demographics are transforming the production and consumption of media content of all kinds. The one-way broadcasting model of traditional media industries is evolving into peer-to-peer communication networks. These changes have been most pronounced in the explosion of user-created content in digital media, from games to online social networks. Similar changes are also being recognized in academic agendas, with interest shifting beyond analyses of the political economy of large-scale practices, or the ideology of industrially produced texts, and toward consumer-generated content production, distribution, and consumption.

Digital storytelling is now practiced around the world in increasingly diverse contexts, from cultural institutions and community development programs to screen innovation and commercial applications. It represents something of a social movement. It also occupies a unique place in consumer-generated media. The phenomenal success of YouTube shows that the Internet is now fully mature as an audiovisual medium, and the success of social networks like MySpace shows the broad hunger for human contact in the digital age. To these powerful social networking tools the digital storytelling technique adds individual imaginative vision, a “poetics” of expression, and the necessary technical competence, offering people a repertoire of creative skills to enable them to tell their own unique stories in a way that captures the imagination of others – whether close family members or the whole world.

At this moment in media history, digital storytelling represents an important fulcrum around which these larger trends pivot. It is at once an emergent form, a new media practice, an activist/community movement and a textual system:



- As a *form*, it combines the direct, emotional charge of confessional disclosure, the authenticity of the documentary, and the simple elegance of the format – it is a digital sonnet, or haiku.
- As a *practice*, digital storytelling combines tuition of the individual with new narrative devices for multiplatform digital publishing across hybrid sites.
- As a *movement*, it represents one of the first genuine amalgamations of expert and consumer/user-led creativity.
- And as an elaborated *textual system* created for the new media ecology, digital storytelling challenges the traditional distinction between professional and amateur production, reworking the producer/consumer relationship. It is a contribution to (and test of) contemporary thinking about “digital literacy” and participation, storytelling formats, and content distribution.

Accordingly, *Story Circle* provides a comprehensive international study of the digital storytelling movement, locating it in current debates on user-led media, citizen consumers, media literacy, and new media participation. Since first emerging in the 1990s, digital storytelling has grown exponentially. It is practiced in the UK, the USA, Australia, Japan, India, Nepal, and Belgium, among other countries, both developed and developing. It is used by schools, universities, libraries, museums, community organizations from health to arts activism, and broadcasters, including notably the BBC. It has the potential for commercial applications. Yet little has been written on digital storytelling, outside of occasional “how-to” guides by practitioners, and both business and educational textbooks that – rightly – extol the virtues of storytelling for learning (see Pink 2005, McDury and Alterio 2002). Beyond such practical tips for busy professionals, there has been little of substance to analyze and situate digital storytelling in the context of new media studies (but see Lundby 2008). *Story Circle* fills the gap.

Foundations: Development of the Movement

The digital storytelling “movement” has been around for a long time. The movement itself was launched by Atchley (www.nextexit.com/) at the American Film Institute in 1993, where the first workshop was held. A year later, workshops were incorporated as the main activity and product of



Table 1.1 Opening years of major digital storytelling programs, by continent

<i>Year began</i>	1994	2001	2002	2003	2005	2006
Name	Center for Digital Storytelling	“Capture Wales,” BBC	Australian Centre for the Moving Image	Kids for Kids	Men as Partners, EnGender Health	Million-Youth-Life-Stories, Museu da Pessoa and Aracati Brazil
Country	USA	Wales	Australia	Israel	South Africa	South America
Continent	North America	Europe	Australasia	Asia	Africa	South America

what would become the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California, directed by Joe Lambert (www.storycenter.org), the primary organization associated with this new media practice (Nissley 2007: 91). In association with the BBC, and with the crucial support of Menna Richards, Controller of BBC Cymru-Wales, Daniel Meadows accomplished an innovative reworking of the Californian model, adapting it to the “media ecology” of UK public broadcasting. “Capture Wales” (www.bbc.co.uk/wales/captures) was launched in 2001. That program has been so successful that besides the hundreds of stories in its own online archive, digital stories have aired regularly on BBC television and radio, and a number of BBC regions in England have produced their own versions.

Thousands of people have participated in a digital storytelling workshop in recent years at different international locations. Hundreds of workshops have been held, with at least one on every continent except Antarctica (Lambert 2006: 1; and see Table 1.1). This diffusion of a community media practice in a global mediasphere has been facilitated by increasingly diverse modes of uptake, and the development of an increasingly sophisticated (albeit largely informal) infrastructure (Howley 2005, Hartley 1996). In terms of the latter, for example, digital storytelling is facilitated by growing numbers of organizations, festivals, conferences, and competitions that are dedicated to or substantially focused on the practice, from the Nabi Digital Storytelling Competition in Korea to the Island Movie Contest in Hawaii. There are commercial products targeting digital storytelling practitioners, such as MemoryMiner digital storytelling software. Adobe markets



Photoshop Elements and Premiere Elements as “effective digital storytelling tools in your classroom.”¹ There are networks of trainers and organizations providing an extended online community around digital storytelling; for instance, “Stories for Change” is a community website funded by MassIMPACT in the USA; and the “Digital Storytelling Network” in Australia.² Some education providers have begun to list “becoming a Digital Storytelling Facilitator” as a possible career path for their graduates, as in Australia’s Swinburne University of Technology’s Bachelor of Design (Multimedia Design).³ Joe Lambert (2000) once commented, “I always thought of our work in Digital Storytelling as what we used to call ‘movement building.’” The current level of activity around the world is proof positive that the movement is not “building”; it is “built.”

Diffusion: Uneven Development

However, digital storytelling has not been taken up evenly “around the world.” Digital divides, among other differences in the accessibility, valuation, and uses of digital storytelling, persist (Bucy and Newhagen 2003). For example, while digital storytelling is widely used across North America, Europe, and Australasia, it is less developed in Asia, Africa, and South America. Most of the workshops held on those continents have been run or led by Western organizations or Western workshop facilitators and, by and large, have not resulted in ongoing local programs (although, as Table 1.1 demonstrates, there are exceptions). A case in point: Jennifer Nowicki of USA-based Creative Narrations led a digital storytelling workshop in Southern China for Shantou University’s English Language Program in 2007 but, since Nowicki returned to the USA, the university has no plans to facilitate its own digital storytelling workshops. Indeed, digital storytelling is still most popular in “digitally saturated areas,” in Knut Lundby’s words, which is unsurprising, given the West’s first-player advantage in the development of a consumer market for digital technologies (Lundby, this volume; Xiudian 2007).

One impediment to the diffusion of the movement is that parts of Asia, particularly Japan and South Korea, draw on different conceptions of “digital storytelling,” which has likely affected the reach of the CDS/BBC models. For instance, the Entertainment Lab at the University of Tsukuba in Japan is typical in its use of “digital storytelling” to denote computer technologies,



drawing on a “generic” conception of *digital* storytelling, rather than the “specific” conception that characterizes CDS-based digital *storytelling* (for more on “generic” vs. “specific” digital storytelling, see McWilliam 2008).⁴

Nevertheless, in most places where digital storytelling is located, the practice can usually be directly linked to the CDS. For example, at least three of the five programs (besides the CDS) listed in Table 1.1 were set up by the CDS. Daniel Meadows attended a CDS workshop before returning to the UK and playing a key role in setting up the “Capture Wales” program with the BBC; CDS co-founder Joe Lambert visited Australia to help set up the Australian Centre for the Moving Image’s programs; and Amy Hill of the CDS delivered the first “Men as Partners” workshops in South Africa (for extended discussion of the latter, see Hill 2006). Lambert also visited Brazil, where his dissemination of the CDS’s practices were incorporated into the Million Life Stories program (see Clarke, this volume); the Museu da Pessoa (Museum of the Person), one of the organizations behind the Million Life Stories program, also co-hosted the “International Day for Sharing Life Stories” with the CDS on May 16, 2008. However, the Israeli Kids for Kids programs – located in Asia, where digital storytelling is significantly less popular – is only indirectly linked to the CDS, which nevertheless remains the central organization associated with both the community media practice itself and its globally networked distribution.

On May 16, 2008 the first “Listen! – International Day for Sharing Life Stories” was held, co-organized by the CDS and the Museu da Pessoa in Brazil. It was announced as follows:

We are part of an international movement of practitioners who view listening, collecting and sharing life stories as a critical process in democratizing culture and promoting social change. We want this day to be especially dedicated to celebrating and promoting Life Story projects that have made a difference within neighborhoods, communities, and societies as a whole ...

We will encourage participation in the day through many possible events, including:

- Story Circles in people’s homes, at workplaces, schools, community centers, virtual environments
- Public open-microphone performances of stories
- Exhibitions of Stories in public venues, as image, text, and audiovisual materials
- Celebratory events to honor local storytellers, practitioners, and organizations



- Open houses for organizations with a life story-sharing component
- Online simultaneous gatherings, postings, and story exchanges
- Print, Radio and Television broadcast programming on life stories, and documentaries that feature oral histories and story exchanges.⁵

The event was supported by groups from all over the world, whose reports can be found online (see n.5).

Story Circle: Around the Book

Part I: What Is Digital Storytelling?

In Part I, introductory chapters by the editors provide a conceptual framework for and an international survey of digital storytelling.

Part II: Foundational Practices

Part II of the book contains important reflections by two digital storytelling pioneers, Joe Lambert and Daniel Meadows, as well as a contribution from Helen Simondson of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), whose programs have led the way in that country, and one from Marie Crook of the BBC on the use of the technique for radio broadcasting.

In a way that is now characteristic of the movement, Joe Lambert combines his curiosity about the details of the practice – how to tell a good story using digital affordances – with “big-picture” issues including global tensions between cosmopolitanism and fundamentalism, problems of access and participation in a digital environment, and the value of progressive arts and educational activism that seeks to emancipate individual freedom (“tell stories”) while building a sense of community (“listen deeply”).

One innovation in this section is Daniel Meadows’s dialogic presentation with Jenny Kidd, who conducted a doctoral research project on “Capture Wales” and whose findings are interspersed with Meadows’s own narrative. In this way, human story and conceptual analysis are kept in touch with each other.

In her review of digital storytelling at ACMI, Helen Simondson raises the general problem of how cultural institutions with statutory collecting,



archival, and exhibitive missions can come to terms with consumer-generated content, and the DIY culture of participatory media. The problems are not only institutional, they are also ideological. Curators and artists are not used to sharing their spaces with what they see as unsophisticated or sentimental work made by amateurs. And “ordinary people” don’t usually see themselves as bearers of national aesthetic values. As Simondson shows, ACMP’s Memory Grid is making both sides think afresh about their role as performers of public culture.

As the form disperses to new platforms, Marie Crook shows how the movement’s commitment to the expertise and autonomy of the participant remains crucial, even in a context where the target demographic includes those who may seem least expert, for instance people seeking to gain literacy skills in reading and writing (never mind “digital” literacy). Nevertheless, argues Crook, they are “experts in their own story,” and this is what needs to be brought out, without the instrumental purposes of the broadcaster or learning provider getting in the way. Thus despite the difference between broadcast radio and digital storytelling, the “story circle” remains the crucial element.

Part III: Digital Storytelling around the World

The middle part of the book pursues digital storytelling around the world, although it does turn out that “the world” is never quite where you may think it is. Thus Part III opens with an account of African life as it is lived not in Africa but in Wales, and to make the cosmopolitan point the authors Sissy Helff and Julie Woletz are located in Frankfurt. Naturally such a context raises issues not of ethnic belonging but of the performance of the self in conditions of cross-cultural flows that include histories of racial conflict and colonialism. However, the stories analyzed by Helff and Woletz are “affirmative” of the self rather than critical of the context. They find this an appropriate although sometimes irritating “narrative means for generating modern transcultural Britishness.”

Next comes Brazilian storytelling analyzed from Portsmouth. Margaret Anne Clarke traces the “One Million Life Stories of Youth” project in Brazil. She considers how the digital storytelling form, including workshop practice and the mode of subsequent dissemination, may adapt to the Brazilian context. She concludes that with flexible implementation to suit local

conditions, digital storytelling can contribute to the “construction of fully democratic frameworks” by fostering collective and individual memories and voices.

In Australia, rapid urban development overlies sites of historic significance to the settler community. The history of such sites is also the memory of people living in and around the area. Here digital storytelling is integrated into oral history, and the very act of recording their memories prompted participants into further animated bursts of sharing. Thus the “Sharing Stories” project described by Jean Burgess and Helen Klæbe was just that; a means for people to share their stories with their families, with each other, with cultural institutions, and with the new generation of developers and users of the places where the stories were set. Along the way, everyone learnt about difference, they shared responsibility for the authority of their own history with formal institutions, and the project as a whole mapped a micro-public linked by narrative.

Media anthropologist Jo Tacchi reports on a large-scale research project in South and Southeast Asia (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia). The project as a whole belongs to the field of “development communication,” working with international agencies to promote information technologies and self-expression among excluded populations. Tacchi herself is interested in the promotion of *voice* in a development context, and found digital storytelling an ideal way to combine Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) with “finding a voice” for the empowerment of marginalized people, such that they may achieve creative agency in the processes of social change that affect them.

Knut Lundby contextualizes the digital storytelling movement in the light of developments in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, but more particularly in relation to sociological theory. He discusses the shift from “media” to “mediations” as the participatory turn and consumer productivity diffuse through both time and space, to reconfigure the relationship between agency and structure. Similarly, Nico Carpentier describes two digital storytelling projects in Belgium in terms of anarchist theory and Foucauldian notions of power. Nancy Thumin brings us full circle to the UK, with an analysis of aspects of “Capture Wales” and “London’s Voices,” which she analyzes in terms of the tensions between the activism of digital mediators and the positioning of members of the public, who she sees as being put in their place by initiatives such as these, which undermine the very notion of the “ordinary person” while seeking to represent it. She finds similar tensions in relation to issues of community and quality.

Part IV: Emergent Practices

The final part of the book presents various emergent practices, some of which go very much against the grain of what has gone before. They show how digital storytelling is evolving – or how it may need to evolve – to adapt to different contexts and for new purposes. The idea of Part IV is to present a number of possible directions not necessarily predicted in the digital storytelling “movement,” which may take forward some of its energies into hitherto uncharted territory. Thus it is not intended to be comprehensive – after all, the possible interpretations of the phrase “digital storytelling” are almost infinite. Instead, the chapters in Part IV offer instances of emergent practices rather than a comprehensive map.

One direction not taken in the digital storytelling movement as we have explored it in this book is towards role-play games and MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games) that foster peer-to-peer relations in multiplayer environments, of which perhaps the best known is “Second Life.” Here, we offer a rather different take on the role-play scenario, where the digital narrative involves exploring an “endless forest” as a deer. Naturally there are other possibilities! However, using this example, where storytelling does not involve verbal language at all, Maria Chatzichristodoulou argues that self-representation in digital narrative can be taken much further than is normal in digital storytelling. Such a context points to “digital narratives that are experiential, multiple, and relational.”

Another direction not taken by most of those involved in the digital storytelling movement is toward commercialization. However, there may well be many market-based applications of the technique that are non-exploitative and fun. Wu Qiongli takes up the challenge of this idea in her chapter by developing a business plan for the extension of the practice in China. She sees opportunities in tourism services, the digital content industries, and in electronics retailing. Marketized applications of digital storytelling may seem to contradict its libertarian origins, but in fact many liberating aspects of popular culture, from music to online social networks, can thrive in a commercial environment, perhaps more readily than in the control culture of formal education or in the hierarchical specializations of art. Long term, the prospects for the wide adoption and retention of digital storytelling without some exposure to markets are extremely limited.

The next chapters return to the slightly more familiar ground of education. Lora Taub-Pervizpour raises some awkward questions in her discussion of

digital storytelling as a tool for engaging marginalized youth. She finds this process fraught with “profoundly contradictory and conflicted situations,” as she raises questions about the mutual responsibilities of story producers and storytellers, and their different investments in popular culture. Her chapter offers one way to get beyond the tensions noted by Thumin. Self-reflexive effort is needed by facilitators and activists, who may have more to learn from the process of “empowering” marginalized groups than the people involved. Patrick Lowenthal extends the theme of how digital storytelling may fare in the educational context with his analysis of issues related to its institutionalization as a school-based activity. The theme of institutionalization is important because organizations are “agents” in their own right, with purposes that may differ from those of either participants or facilitators. These institutional realities and how practitioners navigate them may determine the success or otherwise of digital storytelling initiatives. A question always to be faced is how emancipationist intentions can be pursued using the agency of large-scale institutions which also have their own control imperatives. One way to address such issues is to confront organizational culture directly, as Lisa Dush does. She explores the difficulties, from training to distribution, faced by organizations in general when they try to adopt digital storytelling. She develops a “syntax” based on genre theory to assist in illuminating implementation difficulties in organizations.

Finally, Jerry Watkins and Angelina Russo argue that the original model of digital storytelling from the CDS and BBC Wales results in an individualist but prescriptive mode of expression, in a genre that is more reactive than interactive. Against this, they argue for a “strategic team-based approach to participatory content creation.” Working with cultural institutions like museums, libraries, and galleries, they stress the importance of collaborative and team-based “microdocumentary” production, bringing organizations together with communities of interest in “co-creative systems,” which focus not so much on self-expression as on interactivity and the potential for distribution afforded by Web 2.0 platforms.

All of the chapters in Part IV tend toward a view of the future of digital storytelling that conforms more explicitly to the collaborative, iterative, experiential, dialogic, and socially networked characteristics of Web 2.0 (and its successors). As digital literacy improves, there is also increasing discomfort with a model of propagation that assumes a radical asymmetry between expert facilitators (teachers or artists) and participants (“ordinary” people), whose capabilities are assumed to be close to zero. Digital storytelling can learn from other domains, for instance MMOGs and Web 2.0 interactivity,

and from other contexts, commercial and institutional. Digital storytelling was invented before most of the affordances of Web 2.0 were available, but there is no need to dismiss it as a transitional stage that has been overtaken by new developments (each of which throws up its own problems). Instead, digital storytelling can learn from new applications and existing contexts while retaining its own purposes and hard-won achievements in emergent practices that suit the times.

The Future: Computing Human Contact

Digital storytelling has certainly traveled the world, and it remains a powerful tool for both emancipationist and instrumentalist agendas. However, it must adapt in order to survive, and among the challenges it faces are those raised in the course of this book. Although it developed in the context of Californian festival culture and European public broadcasting, it has matured in the age of YouTube. Is it possible to retain the celebratory, affirmative, confessional, and therapeutic “romanticism” of digital storytelling within a global structure of socially networked entrepreneurial consumerism? Is it possible for teachers to be facilitators, or will their best efforts go toward reproducing organizational inequalities, further disempowering the very disenfranchised voices they were trying to hear?

The only way to resolve such questions is in practice. Digital storytelling is organized around workshop practices and teaching programs that bring big organizations and expert professionals into skin-to-skin contact with “ordinary citizens.” Instead of leaving things as it finds them it is an interfering attempt to propagate the means for digital expression, communication, interaction, and social networking to the whole population. The hope is that all sides get something valuable from the experience and perhaps a more permanent added value to take away and keep. None of this is easy to do without creating further problems. Thus diversity, experimentation, flexibility, and openness to change are more likely to produce valuable outcomes than fixed rules or – worse still – critical disengagement. However, it is clear from this book that critical observers entertain various misgivings about digital storytelling, including:

- as a *form*, it is too sentimental, individualistic, and naively unself-conscious;



- as a *practice*, the means of delivery are too teacher-centric, too caught up in institutional powers and structures;
- as a *movement*, its propagation and dissemination strategies are hopeless – most digital stories persist only as unused archive; and it has a very low profile on the Net, making little use of interactivity and social networking;
- as a *textual system*, the potential for “serious” work is underdeveloped – there is too much attention to self-expression; not enough to the growth of knowledge.

These misgivings need to be seen as a spur to action rather than cause for withdrawal. Digital storytelling is an experiment, so it is capable of iterative self-correction and improvement, as long as enough people stick around long enough to push it forward. *Story Circle* shows how the experiment is going so far. To deal with the problems it is important for everyone involved to maintain a reflexive and critical attitude within a supportive and human purpose. Digital storytelling is a good way to explore how individuals can help each other to navigate complex social networks and organizational systems, which themselves rely on the active agency of everyone in the system to contribute to the growth of knowledge. Digital storytelling uses computational power to attempt human contact. It would be a surprise if we got that right first time; but a pity if we stopped trying.

Notes

- 1 MemoryMiner digital storytelling software (www.memoryminer.com/) and Adobe Digital Storytelling (www.adobe.com/education/digkids/storytelling/index.html).
- 2 “Stories for Change” (storiesforchange.net) and “Digital Storytelling Network” (www.groups.edna.edu.au/course/view.php?id=107).
- 3 See www.swin.edu.au/corporate/careers/Design-MultimediaDesign.pdf
- 4 The Entertainment Lab at the University of Tsukuba (www.graphic.esys.tsukuba.ac.jp/research.html); Department of Digital Storytelling, ZGDV Computer Graphics Centre (www.zgdv.de/zgdv/zgdv-en/r-d-departments/digital-storytelling); Digital Storytelling Effects Lab (disel-project.org/).
- 5 See www.ausculti.org/about.html; www.storycircles.org and storiesforchange.net, and digitalstorytelling.ci.qut.edu.au/

