

Chapter 13

Digital Storytelling

Alan Davis

University of Colorado – Denver, USA

Leslie Foley

Grand Canyon University, USA

ABSTRACT

Digital storytelling, especially in the form of short personally-narrated stories first pioneered by the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley in 1993, is a practice that has now expanded throughout English speaking countries and Western Europe, and has a smaller but growing presence in the developing world. This review examines the origins of the practice and early dissemination, and its current uses in community-based storytelling, education, and by cultural institutions. Research regarding the impacts and benefits of digital storytelling and relationships between storytelling, cognition and identity, and mediating technologies are examined. Current issues in the field, including issues of voice, ownership, power relationships, and dissemination are considered, along with possible future directions for research and implications for social practice and policy.

INTRODUCTION

In the broadest sense, digital storytelling refers to the use of digital media to produce and disseminate stories. That general definition encompasses a wide spectrum of uses of digital media: uses by corporations to control their public image and promote products, by politicians and interest groups to persuade, by artists as a creative medium, by non-profit groups to promote community development, by educators as an instructional tool and learning activity, and by academic researchers to speak to non-academic audiences. Digital stories are prominent in the entertainment industry, from computer games and motion pictures to animated

cartoon shows. Smartphones and dissemination platforms like YouTube have given rise to an unprecedented explosion in participatory digital storytelling by non-professionals. The Pew Research Internet Project (2013) reported that 18% of adults in the United States have created videos and posted them online, and of these, 23% were scripted. A previous survey by the same organization reported that one in four teens that use the Internet records and uploads video to the Web (Lenhardt, 2012). The ways that such products are produced, disseminated, and viewed continue to change at a rapid pace, driven by reciprocal changes in technologies and the activities they mediate (Wertsch, 1998).

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A more focused historical meaning of the term *digital storytelling* refers to a grassroots movement that used multi-media digital tools to help ordinary people tell their own “true stories,” especially people who lacked access to the equipment and technical expertise required to produce and disseminate such stories in the not distant past. Digital storytelling as a phrase denoting an organized practice arose from the collaboration of Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert in California in the 1990s (Lambert, 2006), culminating in the founding of the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley in 1998. The influence of CDS has been acknowledged by most people writing about digital storytelling today, including most of the authors of the works included in this review. The origin story of CDS, paraphrased from Lambert’s (2006) account, provides insights into elements of motivation and purpose, format, and processes that continue to influence digital storytelling today.

Lambert (2006, p. 2) described his childhood home as “an oasis of liberal friendliness in the desert of 1950s Texas conservatism.” He immersed himself in folk music, especially songs that told stories of working people, headed to San Francisco in 1976, and became involved in the People’s Theater Coalition. In 1986, he and three friends started *Life on the Water*, a theater company experimenting with solo performance, and it was there that he encountered Dana Atchley. Atchley had been traveling around the US collecting stories of offbeat Americans and presenting them on college campuses and community centers in multi-media shows. In 1990, he had an idea for a multi-media show about his own life, to be called *Next Exit*, and he brought it to Lambert at *Life on the Water*. Lambert could not obtain funding to produce it, but the two began to share ideas as Atchley produced the show himself and Lambert included it in a solo performance festival. By 1992, the San Francisco Bay area was experiencing the “digital tsunami” of Silicon Valley, and Atchley was refining the multi-media aspects of his show. He attended meetings of the newly

formed International Interactive Communications Society, and exchanged ideas with people bringing digital technology to performance arts.

In 1993, Atchley was invited to perform in a National Video Festival in Los Angeles, and to lead a three-day workshop there in the new Digital Media lab of the American Film Institute, helping people make short personal video stories, inspired by the example of his own “digital story”. Lambert and two associates skilled in digital technology helped him prepare for the workshop and facilitate it. Ten people participated, and each produced a digital story. Lambert found the experience to be unlike anything he had previously experienced:

The sense of transformation of the material, and of accomplishment, went well beyond the familiar forms of creative activity I could reference. And even as the tools themselves frustrated me, I knew that this activity had a special power that could be shaped into a formal creative practice. (Lambert, 2006, p. 10)

Monte Fay Hallis produced a three-minute digital story at that first workshop about her friend Tanya Shaw, a woman struggling with AIDS, who died shortly before the story’s screening. The story was personal, with emotional importance to the teller, and it made an emotional connection with the viewer. It was simple and spare in a way that was aesthetically pleasing. It also personalized a larger issue of social justice.

From this beginning, Lambert left theater work to devote himself to continue the work of helping ordinary people to create their own digital stories. He and Atchley co-founded the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) as a formal organization in Berkeley in 1998, making use of intensive workshops to enable people who normally lacked technical expertise and access to digital video editing software to make digital stories. They typically screened the story of Tanya and other selected stories from early workshops (Lambert, 2006), to model elements of narrative content

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