Chapter 11
Interactive Storytelling and Experiential Learning:
The Prospect of "Vertical Narrativity"

Justin A. Wolske
Caseworx, Inc., USA & New York Film Academy, USA

ABSTRACT

The author looks at the recent drivers that have changed the ways authors and audiences share stories, first by looking at the landscape in art and entertainment, and then by analyzing how these drivers are affecting education. Inspired by his own work as a film and new media producer and his recent foray into educational media, the author isolates four different factors for consideration: (a) the falling price and rising accessibility of digital image acquisition, (b) the Internet as a cheap and instantaneous distribution platform, (c) the evolving ways in which audiences are accessing and consuming content, and (d) increased interactivity between storyteller and audience. By analyzing both the entertainment and education industries, the author predicts that storytelling—a dormant educational tool through much of the 20th century—will become a centerpiece of future educational models. Furthermore, he asserts that storytelling itself must radically change to accommodate this new discourse.

INTRODUCTION

The prisoners in a maximum security prison had little to entertain themselves with so they told jokes to each other. But they had long since run out of new jokes to tell, so they simply numbered the jokes and yelled out the numbers. A new prisoner hearing "forty-two," "sixty-four," "one hundred eight" being yelled down the hall with raucous laughter following each number asked about what was happening, and it was explained to him. He asked if he could try it, and his cellmate said sure. He hollered "thirty-six," and nothing happened. Next he tried "twenty-seven" and still nothing.

The new prisoner finally asked his cellmate what was wrong, and he replied, "You didn't tell them so well" (Schank, 1990).

Our goal for this chapter is to look at the increasingly flexible methods of narrativity in art and entertainment — the cultural cradles for storytelling today — to see how they will affect learning, specifically, experiential learning. Story is critical in learning how to do; it collects and curates experience along themes and demands something from its audience. *Buy Coke*. *Vote for Sarkozy*. *Care about Frodo Baggins' journey to Mordor*. Our belief is that the world of education is moving past the centuries-old model of scribbling notes as a uniform, linear lecture is issued forth, and moving back to a millennia-old model of structured discourse, from which an organic, communal cloud of knowledge begins to grow. We believe that a confluence of factors are just beginning to move us past the concept of a person buying into a collective education experience, and into an age where the learning apparatus — technological and infrastructural — becomes supple enough to cater to the specific student's needs and learning objectives. We think non-linear, experiential storytelling will be key to that change, and we will look at some of the most important drivers of that change. We start with technology, and how the free-falling price and near ubiquitous availability of high-level media acquisition is opening up transformative, narrative learning opportunities for educators. We will then look at how cheap, global, instantaneous distribution is allowing disparate audiences to come together to create collaborative narrative and learning experiences, opening up opportunities in addition to challenges of scale and audience learning comprehension. We will see how recent media consumption patterns have had real effects on how people understand story and education. Finally, we will analyze interactivity – the function of technology and distribution and the area

where traditional and new media storytelling bear the least resemblance – to see how educators and students are using gameplay, flipped learning and other groundbreaking practices to stretch the concept of how we learn from stories. By doing so, we hope to demonstrate how one bustling corner of this communication revolution is bringing together two practitioners who need to remain close: the Teacher and the Storyteller.

BACKGROUND: STORYTELLING, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND CASEWORX

Early on in his popular lecture series at UCLA, Mandalay Entertainment CEO Peter Guber routinely asks a question of his audience, mostly graduate students from the prestigious film or business schools. "What business are we in?" he calls out, referring to the one that puts out movies and television for people to watch in theaters or at home. Every year the answers are largely the same, safe choices that underscore an environment where people are still feeling each other out. "The movie business," someone always predictably calls out right before the more sophisticated "entertainment industry." "Content distribution," an MBA student might add. Since it's a large group of really smart people, a clever answer like "popcorn and soda distribution" usually pops up. Like any veteran storyteller, Guber milks this part for maximum effect, and after a pause, he responds. "We are in the transportation business. We are in the emotional transportation business." It's an innovative thought, but it also has the benefit of being true (Guber, 2011). For entertainment media, the job is to take an audience from Emotional Point A and deliver them to Emotional Point B. That's the value proposition. That is a movie's way to fulfill the function of narrative.

For other forms of storytelling, the objective can be slightly different, but they all conform to a central concept. Narratives want you to *do*

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