

Storytelling in Context

Abstract

This chapter of “Digital Storytelling in Practice” puts the current state of storytelling, as well as its relationship to libraries, in context. By briefly examining both the distant and recent past of storytelling, we can see how it arrived in its current state. We examine how the basic principles of storytelling have remained the same and also look at how the rise of the Internet and digital technology has the potential to transform the process of storytelling and expand its audience.

Storytelling and Technology: The Past and the Recent Past

“If people aren’t taught the language of sounds and images, shouldn’t they be considered as illiterate as if they left college without being able to read or write?”

—George Lucas¹

The concept of storytelling is older than human history itself. Before the invention of written language, wisdom, knowledge, and information were passed down orally, and often through what would today be considered stories. In one sense, storytelling has always utilized the latest available technology. Some have said that cave paintings and other ancient findings were sometimes used to tell stories. It may be hard to think about prehistoric drawings on a cave wall as a form of technology, but at the dawn of human civilization, they were just that. The

A Brief History of Storytelling (web video)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPxgz9aBFMw

video listed in the gray box provides a light-hearted look at one theory on the prehistoric origins of storytelling.

In the pre-Internet twentieth century, storytellers used the latest technology to share their stories with the world. Though vinyl, film, cassette tapes, videotapes, and eventually compact disks and DVDs, storytellers gained the ability to share with audiences of thousands or even millions, instead of hundreds, the wisdom, knowledge, and entertainment that comes with this age-old process.

Storytelling: Changing While Remaining the Same

With the emergence of widespread personal computing and the Internet, the relationship between storytelling and technology has transformed dramatically in a short period of time. Where technology was previously a tool that could be utilized to spread stories to a wider audience, it is now a tool that can become a deeply integrated part of the storytelling process and of the story itself. In this small amount of time, the concept of digital storytelling has created dramatic changes in what tellers can do and provided them with the ability not only to reach new audiences, but to reach those audiences in a new way.

In the summer of 2008, I enrolled in a digital storytelling camp that took place in the serene mountains of Colorado. People from all walks of life, including teachers, school librarians, and even ministers, attended. We learned about the technology tools one can use to create sounds and edit images. Each participant eventually produced a video that could be shared with other attendees. While technology historically has been something in which only “tech geeks” gain fluency, with modern digital tools, you don’t have to be a computer genius to learn



Figure 1
As the contrast between this painting and this photograph illustrates, from the time of its prehistoric roots, storytelling has always had a relationship with technology.

how to Photoshop images or create audio effects that can manipulate a viewer’s emotions (both in ways the author intends and in ways that he or she may not have anticipated). What we found at the camp, however, was that the core of storytelling—simply telling a good story—hasn’t changed much since its prehistoric origins.

Folklore scholar Eric Miller lists these twelve principles, which he considers to be essential to effective storytelling:²

- “A Storyteller Is Fully Present.”
- “Storytelling Is Multi-track. . . . Although the spoken word is usually the primary means of communication, storytelling is synaesthetic activity, i.e., it may occur on one, many, or all sensory levels.”
- “Visual Accompaniment Is Never Essential.” (Note: Even when talking about digital storytelling, this point is still important.)
- “A Storyteller Has a Unique Relationship with Each Listener.”
- “A Storyteller Is Always Listening.”
- “A Storyteller Instantaneously Incorporates Everything—including Interruptions—into the Ongoing Event.”
- “Storytelling Is a Reciprocal, Shared Event.”

- “Storytelling is Interactive Largely Through Listeners’ Empathy and Enactment.”
- “At a Storytelling Event, the Human Bonding, the Relationships, Are Inseparable from the Imparting of Information.”
- “Storytelling Events Feature the Possibility of Spillover into Real Life.”
- “Storytelling Supports the Individual’s Struggle.”
- “A Storyteller Is Both a Keeper and Presenter of the Community’s Culture, and a Bridge to Realms beyond the Community.”

Whether you are speaking to a small audience in a conference room or broadcasting to thousands of viewers and listeners through an audio or video conference, these principles are crucial to telling a good, engaging story.

On the other hand, there are elements of digital storytelling that are specific to the practice. With digital storytelling, you may need to do things like decode the meaning of images, evaluate the authenticity of a website, or understand the issues surrounding copyright of borrowed media. In that sense, digital storytelling spills over

Storytelling Theory and Practice (web video)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFC-URW6wkU&feature=fww



Figure 2
Photos from the DigiTales 2008 summer camp in Colorado.

to countless other disciplines. While going digital may require a storyteller to branch out technologically, the basic principles of how to tell a story remain unchanged. In this report, we'll incorporate these principles by illustrating how you can use a variety of media and technology to help people learn and make storytelling more personal and engaging. The video listed in the gray box offers some theoretical foundations for storytelling.

Oral storytelling is an organic process; the teller retells a tale learned, in person, from another storyteller. While there are many books on storytelling, the process itself is verbal. Digital storytelling gives us new opportunities for preserving and enhancing this age-old process. With the use of social networking tools such as video-sharing sites, blogs, and other online forums, stories have the ability to travel and transform as never before. Social networking websites like Facebook and MySpace, as well as tools like radio, television, and video games make digital stories living, interactive entities. They can develop new knowledge and conversations because they can be viewed and modified on a mass scale.

Knowing how to effectively create a story structure, develop strong characters, establish appropriate timing and expand a plot are aspects of storytelling that do not disappear with the digital format. In fact, these elements take on a different meaning and require new skills as the storyteller must learn how to effectively weave technology into the work without losing the soul of the story in order to convey the intended meaning.

Libraries and Storytelling

The modern library has played a central role in the development and proliferation of modern storytelling. Many public libraries include storytelling events as part of their

programming for children and young adults, and some incorporate it into their programming for adults. Since public libraries are public spaces and storytelling events are community-oriented, the symbiotic relationship between the two continues to thrive.

The emergence of modern computers and Internet technology has seen public libraries emerge as community technology leaders. For many people, the public library is the only source of free high-speed Internet access or the only place where they can access a computer with a word processing program. Given this new role, it makes sense for librarians to embrace digital storytelling.

Libraries and related institutions like museums and archives, as well as educational institutions like colleges and universities, are taking the art of digital storytelling seriously. For the purposes of this report, we'll define digital storytelling as the act of using sound, images, and video to form a narrative. Since digital storytelling can span almost any subject, it's definitely emerging as a hot trend in library and education circles.

Like traditional stories, digital stories help form and define our culture. They provide a window into who we are at a given time and in a particular place. To paraphrase author Henry Jenkins, literacy is shifted from an idea of individual expression to that of community involvement.³

With traditional storytelling, archiving was an important, but somewhat slippery concept. It is difficult to generate a standard, consistent system of archiving for a medium that is primarily oral, and where audio recordings may or may not exist. Archiving remains relevant in digital storytelling, but with modern technology, we have a much wider range of options when it comes to preserving and organizing material. Libraries, museums, and similar organizations are now in a strong position to store and organize this information for others to explore.

Tools for creating digital stories are becoming more and more accessible, not just to librarians and information professionals, but to the general public. This is a compelling reason for librarians to lead the way in helping others learn how to use the technological tools. Learning how to create a coherent narrative using technology is a critical skill set and will become even more important as technology plays a bigger and bigger role in education. If we fail to provide these information literacy skills, we contribute to widening the participation gap of those who can tell their stories through this evolving medium and those who cannot. A culture is shaped by the stories it tells.

This issue of *Library Technology Reports* will explore the foundations of digital storytelling and its place in the world of librarianship and education. We will start by exploring how digital storytelling helps build twenty-first century skills: not only literacy, but the logical and critical-thinking skills and ability to understand culture that come with learning how to tell a story. We will also look at digital storytelling in practice by taking a look at several libraries, museums, and institutions of higher educa-

tion that have incorporated digital technologies into their storytelling programs. We will see how these institutions have used technology to share the gift of digital storytelling. Next, we'll also look at some of the common technology tools used to create sound, edit images, and make a video—these are, of course, the actual tools needed to create a digital story. The report concludes with a toolbox of resources for digital storytelling.

Notes

1. George Lucas, quoted in James Daly, "Life on the Screen: Visual Literacy in Education," *Edutopia*, Sept. 2004, www.edutopia.org/life-screen (accessed Sept. 21, 2009).
2. Eric Miller, "12 Principles of Storytelling," www.storytellingandvideoconferencing.com/16.html (accessed Aug. 17, 2009).
3. Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009): 4.