Voices for a New Vernacular: A Forum on Digital Storytelling

Introduction

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At this point in the history of communication and media studies research, it is safe to say digital storytelling is not a new phenomenon, or really all that novel. With technologies of digital production and consumption stitched into the fabric of our social and cultural lives, the digital has come to occupy an almost natural place in human communication. The nonlinear, interactive, transmedia, and remixed, mashed-up modes of expression that characterize digital narratives have quickly become a lexicon for understanding the vagaries and ideals of our postmodern, post-truth, and post-identity culture more broadly, though it is important to note that very little of this world is actually "new." Instead, it is a reformulation of what has already existed—hence the focus on one of the oldest modes of human information sharing: storytelling.

With that in mind, we present this Special Section, "Voices for a New Vernacular: A Forum on Digital Storytelling." This section consists of interviews we conducted with scholars from across the communication disciplines, each with a different perspective on the central idea of narrative. In the articles that follow, we will hear from Henry Jenkins, Zizi Papacharissi, Knut Lundby, Janet Murray, Hector Postigo, Veena Raman, Vladimir Barash, and Marie Laure-Ryan on what they think about defining the concept of digital storytelling and what their research and expertise has revealed about it.

To illustrate, perhaps an example is in order (and a fairly musty one at that). In a Season 5 episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* entitled "Darmok," broadcast in 1991—the dawn of Internet prehistory—erstwhile Captain Jean-Luc Picard finds himself isolated on the planet El-Adrel with the captain of a race known as Tamarians. It is a rather low-stakes mission, with Picard charged by Starfleet to only make meaningful contact with the Tamarian captain and his people. There is no impending threat of galactic war or engineering crisis on the ship. Instead, the two captains are faced with a much more confounding crisis: a crisis of communication. To cut through the plot and get to the point, the Tamarians communicate meaning not through straightforward symbols organized in a recognizable syntax and grammar, but through allegories based on their shared folklore. When Picard realizes this, he establishes a

connection to the Tamarians and finds a way into their lexicon by reciting one of the oldest recorded human stories, the "Epic of Gilgamesh."

This *Star Trek* example may be one that more than a few media studies students have encountered by now, but it is useful in that it captures the inherently personal, yet universalizing, communication of meaning that happens via storytelling—the idea that there is some sort of shared humanness revealed in the emotional arcs and narrative beats that constitute a story, regardless of medium or language of transmission. It illustrates a bias that many of us who study media come to our work with—namely, that there is something unquantifiable and indescribably valuable about telling stories. And yet, something about the digital era seems to be changing what we think we know about stories, their seeming stability as a cultural form, and their ability to connect us as a human species.

Faced with these changes and challenges to stories, we reached out to and interviewed a collection of leading academics thinking about the relationship between digital technologies and the narrative arts. Our goal was to gather people who thought about digital storytelling with a similar language and similar sets of concepts, but who also embodied distinct and dispersed "lines of flight," to borrow a term from Deleuze and Guattari (1983), that could be taken up as we think about the conditions that construct what we understand as digital storytelling. The interviewees were presented with questions via e-mail, some similar and some tailored to their specific interests, and we encouraged them to follow the energy of their own thinking as they responded. We edited the responses for style and clarity, leaving all the content intact. The responses reveal the value of thinking in process; responding to prompts reveals the cross-currents that constitute the way we value, understand, and analytically deconstruct what we mean when we talk about stories.

Three themes emerged again and again, in different ways, throughout the interviews, and it is worth taking a moment to sketch these themes in broad strokes. Across the interviews, considerations of *technology*, *story agency*, and notions of *collective audiences* recur, indicating to us that these are the primary categories that digital storytelling reconfigures. It is on this ground that new practices and cultural modes begin to take form, so it is worth briefly considering each in its own regard.

Obviously, technology is of central concern to anyone interested in digital storytelling. But it is less deterministic in scope than one might suspect at first glance. The concept of technological "affordances" has been especially useful for those who are interested in understanding the interplay between technological changes and story forms. Changes such as hypertext, graphic interfaces, virtual reality, mobile phones, geolocation software, social media, and artificial intelligence each connote a wealth of narrative and experiential possibilities in stories, but to ascribe infinite potential to each change misses the persistent fact that narrative is a particularly human endeavor. As such, technological changes are understood as socially and culturally significant when they augment and deepen our existing modes of meaning making. This is not a novel thing to state, but it is the key to understanding the relationship between the digital and storytelling without reverting to wide-eyed appeals to determinism whenever something new appears on the horizon. Instead, and as many of the following interviews lead us to do, we should ask how the existing world changes when faced with something new. How is it folded into what already exists? How are its possibilities defined, constrained, and given productive form? Armed with

these kinds of questions, we can begin to comprehend the impact of what is new and next, to marvel at the shiny new toys, but to not lose sight of what persists.

As our modes of storytelling change, notions of agency within the structure of a narrative also shift. Just as Roland Barthes (1977) laid out in "The Death of the Author," control over meaning and interpretation was rarely the sole provenance of a story's creator. Stuart Hall (1980), of course, picked up this line of thought in his seminal essay "Encoding/Decoding," noting that, although the production of meaning and interpretation occurs within a text's parameters, the audience plays an equal and important role in making a story, text, film, television show, magazine, novel, advertisement, video game, or interactive experience into something culturally important. If anything, digital technologies, especially those that afford interactivity in narratives, grant audiences partial powers of story constitution and authorship. But it is important to note that a structure continues to exist. Though it may afford narrative possibilities and its constitutive elements and technical workings may be hidden, narrative platforms still adhere to rules. Though, as the rules change along with the possibilities embodied by new technologies, it is important to maintain a focus on agency within our narratives and platforms, to ask who has the power to make the rules, play by the rules, and change the rules as well as what, within the ever-expanded structure of story, gives them that power.

Finally, we come to what may be the most optimistic potential of digital storytelling: the ability to constitute new crowds and groups through the narrative sharing of human experience. This particular power accorded to story is perhaps among its oldest and most romanticized. It is the kernel at the heart of the *Star Trek* example above, and it is this connective power that many scholars, commentators, futurists, and audiences seem to regard with awe. But if digital storytelling magnifies this power in unforeseen ways, it is also necessary to ask how that collective power is then used. Viral marketers, corporate synergists, and cross-promoters have all found ways to extract profit from the crowds convened around digital campfires. Activists and political optimists, too, have seen the potential for human change, while cynics say this digital collectivizing betrays actual political potential. Yet neither outcome is promised, or at least not totally determined by design. So, then, critical attention is needed around the following questions: How is audience power conceived and produced in digital narratives? Is it given a referent power in the world outside the story? How do platforms, narrative structures, and even media outlets attempt to marshal that power? Where are the places where that audience power defies expectations or becomes unruly?

It is our hope that by identifying these central thematics and potential questions, readers of this Special Section will find the sparks that ignite their own thinking. We end this introduction by noting that in the interview format, nothing is settled, that questions connote possibility. Through generous exchange, each interviewee lays out his or her views on how storytelling not only persists and adapts to new mediums and modes of expression but also remains a vitally human task—and this humanness, this essence of life, is as ineffable as it is inescapable.

References

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