Voices for a New Vernacular: A Forum on Digital Storytelling

Interview with Janet Murray

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***What makes digital storytelling different than other received forms of storytelling? Admittedly, digital** is a loose term that comes with some restrictive assumptions. With that being said, what encompasses the digital for you, and what particular affordances does it offer?*

It is a continuation of the ancient tradition of storytelling in a new medium. As with other media innovations such as language, writing, printing, and recording technologies, new affordances of inscription and transmission lead to new possibilities for representation. In the case of computation, as I describe in my books *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997, 1998; updated 2016, 2017) and elaborate on in *Inventing the Medium* (2011), for genres beyond narrative, we can identify four affordances—the procedural, the participatory, the encyclopedic, and the spatial—that together support new forms of interactivity and immersion.

It is useful to think about digital storytelling as *multisequential* rather than the more commonly used term of *nonlinear*, because it reminds us that we have the possibility of creating more complex story structures in this new medium rather than merely disrupting legacy (*unisequential*) formats.

Why do certain forms of storytelling seem to persist regardless of platform?

We seem to have a desire to tell very long stories that we can remain immersed in over long periods of time. In oral traditions, we create epic poems, recited around campfires over multiple days for many hours at a sitting. In the 19th century, we saw the rise of the fat three-volume novel, which could also be issued in serial form over many months, with people eagerly awaiting the next installment of three or four chapters. In the 21st century, we have viewers binge-watching multiple seasons of a television series.

Digital distribution of this unilinear format of the TV series has made for much more consistency and complexity in plotting and character development, because writers are aware that the series will be watched as a whole rather than as single episodes. But it has also resulted in stories that are too complex to follow and that cry out for navigation by thread and in conjunction with explanatory notes. The work of my eTV research group at Georgia Tech has been addressing this new complexity in storytelling and making prototypes that grow out of these evolving complex story structures (see http://etv.gatech.edu).

What is the most exciting prospect of digital communication for you? Why? How do you see it changing in coming years?

The root of my excitement about narrative in computational forms is my sense that this is a potential power-up for human intelligence similar to the invention of print. I am excited at the prospect of contributing to the larger cultural work of inventing the media conventions that will make digital formats more coherent and better exploit the new affordances of the medium. One of the most exciting areas to watch is journalism, which is reinventing itself as a digital practice, assimilating print, video, social media, archiving, and information visualization conventions into the practice of reporting what is happening right now to a global audience. We used to understand what was meant by a "story" in journalism, but digital affordances are reopening that question. I have a PhD student Sergio Goldenberg, who is also a producer at CNN whose thesis focuses on this question of how we can redefine the story to tell it more completely and accurately, and particularly to follow events over time rather than reporting from scratch with each newsbreak.

What does a focus on the digital tend to obscure? How can students, practitioners, and scholars alike give the proper kind of attention to these issues?

Computer scientists sometimes use the term *story* very loosely, and they definitely use it in very different senses than humanists use the word. For example, Patrick Winston at MIT is a leading artificial intelligence researcher, the former head of the MIT AI Lab, and he has been focusing recently on creating summaries of stories. He is able to show some very impressive computational results, but his summary of *Macbeth* does not resemble the humanist's understanding of the play, because it focuses on a recitation of events and lacks the emphasis that comes from responding to the emotional and moral content of the play. Similarly, Michael Mateas's work, which includes two of the most accomplished AI works with story content, *Façade* and *Prom Week*, values computational complexity over interaction design and story immersion. All this computational work is a great contribution to the representational power of the medium, but sometimes the claims made for computational accomplishments confuse the level on which the representation is successful. It may work for the programmer, but not for the interactor; and if there is no human audience, then there is no story.

What do you see as the current state of storytelling within game spaces?

There is a remarkable range of practice in incorporating story elements into games. It is most impressive to me when it creates the experience I call "dramatic agency"—when the game mechanics map onto story expectations, and the interactor is motivated to take an action by his or her involvement in the story.

Clara Fernandez-Vara (2015), a former PhD student of mine who is now a faculty member at NYU, has written very persuasively of the ways in which adventure games in particular knit together game mechanics and story. The Telltale Games based on the television series *The Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones*, which have achieved great popularity on the tablet platform, are good examples of designers finding ways to adapt game conventions so that choices have story significance. This represents a devaluing of twitch speed and a greater emphasis on dialogue and particularly on choices that involve loyalty between characters or moral values. The popularity of the game *Gone Home*, which uses the framework of an adventure exploration game to tell the story of a lesbian teenager's coming of age, is also a significant indicator of the growth of new storytelling genres. The popularity of Twine as a platform for hypertext stories is also significant here. And Emily Short's tablet story-game *Blood and Laurels*, created on a platform she co-invented with Richard Evans, who was a lead AI programmer for *The Sims*, is a landmark in creating a story using the variation possible in highly procedural digital environments in a way that creates true dramatic agency.

You have argued against considering narrative in terms of concepts such as* transmedia*. For what reasons might it be better to analyze narrative structures on a platform-by-platform basis?

My argument against transmedia is that it limits us into seeing story worlds as going across fixed, legacy platforms rather than focusing on the question I find more exciting, which is, what new genres can we make on the emerging digital platform? Instead of seeing a television show that has extended its franchise to a game, I'd like to see an episodic video story world that incorporates participatory elements within it. I describe such an environment in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* in the chapter on digital TV, and even though that book came out in 1997, it is still a futuristic proposal.

References

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* The original published in hardback by Free Press, Simon and Schuster 1997; then MIT Press in 1998. Subsequently, the revised edition was published as an ebook in 2016 by Simon and Schuster and to be published in paperback by MIT Press in 2017.