

## Voices for a New Vernacular: A Forum on Digital Storytelling

### Interview with Hector Postigo

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#### ***What makes digital storytelling different than other received forms of storytelling?***

Digital storytelling is something that I would say is not easy to pin down. The idea that digital media can impart on a narrative's flow something categorically different than pulp or film is reasonable, but the "how" of it will always be a matter of conjecture and debate. From my experience in video games research, I would say that digital storytelling is unique in that it's interactive and evolving *in situ*. As I wrote that, I felt I was stating the obvious, but one thing that may not be obvious is the creative element of interactivity that emerges in video games as a form of storytelling. Admittedly, designers may choose a particular narrative arc to orient play, but they cannot direct play absolutely. When users engage the narrative as backdrop to play, then they can push the narrative arc in directions that were not necessarily intended by designers. In video game studies, we've called that process *emergence*.

I can imagine that there has to be a level of anxiety among digital storytellers when they've chosen video games as their format. It would be like F. Scott Fitzgerald publishing *The Great Gatsby* as a choose-your-own-adventure novel. If you recall, Choose Your Own Adventure books gave readers the option to choose—at different parts during the narrative—different outcomes. The choices were fixed and limited by the number of words that the publisher had allowed for and how much pulp the author and publisher were willing to use to afford the user—in this case, the reader—a given number of options. Choosing one's own adventure in video games, however, is not limited by the number of words or pulp available, but rather by the computational complexity of the software and hardware platforms that run the game. In some cases, while choices are always computationally limited and predictable, they appear to the user (and, truthfully, to some designers) as infinite. Video game narratives that can tell a story so indeterminately that interactivity ultimately defines a story's arc and outcomes are referred to as *sandboxes*. Sometimes it's not whether you win or lose that tells the story, but it's literally how you play the game.

***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?***

I think I answered some parts of this question above, but it bears saying again and expanding: Interactivity is obviously the germ of the digital, but also indeterminacy and chaos. We like to think that as writers we can always shape the narrative and are masters of the story, but the medium paradoxically can be deterministically indeterminate. In other words, because digital stories are interactive and therefore evolving as the user plays or reads them, their outcome can never absolutely be known. Casey O'Donnell, a good friend and collaborator from Michigan State University, and I recently authored a chapter for the *Handbook in Science and Technology Studies* (2016). In that chapter, we make the argument that no matter how computationally knowable any video game or interactive system can be, it is possible to generate so many outcomes that nothing short of the unified fields equation would let a designer know what absolutely will happen in a game.

Therefore, I'd say that the central affordance that gives digital storytelling a categorically different narrative experience in the case of video games is that it teeters on (and sometimes goes over) the precipice of directed chaos. If we stop for a second and think of our favorite novels or our favorite films, we might find an element of that in their narrative construct. I like to use the example of *The Matrix* trilogy in the film genre. In literature, I like Melville's *Moby Dick* as an example. *The Matrix* trilogy has so many references to pop culture, science fiction, philosophy, literature, and history that one could watch it a number of times and find a different tangential narrative arcs every time. It is a messiah story, a history lesson, a rumination on the nature of consciousness, a contemplation of predetermination in absolutely knowable systems, Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, and/or an affirmation and rejection of free will. You can think of each of the references as a hyperlink that can lead down one rabbit hole or another. While the central narrative to the story in *The Matrix* trilogy remains the same no matter which rabbit hole we follow, its meaning changes a little bit. Affordances in films like *The Matrix* trilogy are the viewers' ability to spot the references in what appear otherwise inconsequential scenes or set pieces.

In other words, the affordance structure set out by the filmmakers is each viewer's individual life experience and subject position. The above is a very esoteric read on a pop culture classic, but there is an element of that in any film. Color patterns, scene sequences, names, set pieces, and so on either intentionally or unintentionally call forth viewers' menus of memories and feelings about what they are seeing. In so doing, they make viewers participatory in ways that they might not realize. Similarly, lifeworlds and subject positions are part of the affordance structure alongside the narrative arc and the computational limits of the digital story.

*Moby Dick* is no different. One has to know a bit about religion, the occult, philosophy, American history, and transcendentalism to understand that Melville wrote many stories under one title and many of them had only a tangential connection to whaling or the white whale. Similarly, our subject position serves as part of the affordance structure for how we come to read and interpret *Moby Dick*. This point goes beyond symbolism, pointing to a cultural language that is both culturally universal while at the same time defined by lifeworlds and subject positions that are as diverse as there are stars in the heavens. Digital storytelling formats like video game design are not much different, except that the player can literally

write the story. The player can inscribe through play a narrative unique to that player, to his or her phenomenology, and the referents the game design calls forth intentionally or by accident. At its most expansive, play is transformative in both an experiential sense and, for some copyright scholars, a legal sense. So in sum, indeterminacy, interactivity, and transformativity encompass the digital for me.

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

Recently I decided I would reread Joseph Campbell's classic *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949/1972) and Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1995). So, it's a fortuitous coincidence that you ask this question. If you're familiar with those two works, you may recall that Campbell may have at times reduced forms of most storytelling to the recurring patterns where the reader or listener finds a man or woman out of his or her element, called to rise to a higher calling and tested through a quest. Therefore, stories in that form tend to have three parts hallmarked by key moments of conversion, a generally well-defined demarcation between the hero and his or her obstacles, and a conclusion that brings about some form of redemption or catharsis. But that's not always the case, so I would say Campbell was not entirely right. We may be reading about the same hero's life journey told many different ways (the 1,000 faces), but I would argue that every once in a while, the hero is indeterminate, chaotic, and a mirror to the faces reading about him or her or watching the silver screen. And those faces looking at the screen are legion and project onto the hero unique elements that can only be present if that hero is "mirror, mirror on the wall" by being a little (if not a lot) unpredictable. In video games, it's the reason many think that Master Chief, the protagonist in Bungie's classic *Halo*, wears a helmet with the visor made of reflective material and always down over the face. To look at him is to look in the mirror.

Nietzsche, I think comes closer to the underlying persistence in storytelling forms, regardless of platform. In my opinion, the tension between Dionysus and Apollo, as Nietzsche (1995) describes it, is the tension between the diameter of a circle (a line defined by diametrically opposed points mirroring each other along the circle's arc) and a circle's circumference. One is knowable absolutely. It begins and it ends. The other is not. One, then, is order; the other, while beautiful, is chaos. The latter bends along an arc that never stops bending; it never ends and never begins.

Who knows where it's going! The only thing we know for sure about the relationship between the diameter and the circumference is that dividing one by the other yields pi. I would argue that if a circumference and diameter are metaphors for the human experience, then pi is the human soul: infinite, random, and a complex number. Pi is the tension between human outside nature and human still in nature's grip, where life can be beautiful but also brutish and short.

Why have I spent so much time answering this question in this way? Because if digital storytelling, as I understand it, does anything better or significantly different, it affords pi in a different way. The enduring form of any storytelling, regardless of platform, pivots on the tension between the fixed and the indeterminate, order and chaos, reason and savagery, and/or the realism of Jean-Batiste Grueze and the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollock. So, the reason some forms of storytelling endure is because humans are still doing the telling.

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

The voices speaking through digital communication can be legion. The capacity of the many to speak as one or as a cacophony through their own volition, not dictated by programming schedules and mass media narratives, thrills me as an observer, listener, and participant. Often there is great beauty. Sometimes it's a train wreck, but still I can't look away. There is, of course, the reality that no matter how participatory any digital storytelling platform is, it was still designed by someone with a purpose in mind, and it may not have been to afford communication that serves human flourishing. How we shape that in the coming years will ultimately shape us as a species and a collection of societies spinning around on our pale blue dot. I think how it will change in the next years is ultimately unknowable. It may serve to give voice to our better natures and reshape all manner of social practices from storytelling to government. One can hope it will be for the best, but there are always attempts to exploit loopholes and free-ride nascent changes in how we communicate and organize ourselves.

The peer-economy model for capitalist accumulation gives me hope and scares me a little, for example. I often ask students to think of the first time they saw someone use cash. They have a hard time remembering, and most agree that it did seem odd to them, as very young children, that their fathers or mothers were getting food or clothing in exchange for a piece of paper. Parents will explain the rules and why this piece of paper has value to inquisitive toddlers, but it dawns on most children that it's a game. It sure looks and feels like a game, and everyone is playing it. Break the rules and you starve or go to jail. So it's a game you have to play, and we all know that any game you have to play is not really play and thus not really fun.

Currency is a technology in the game, the stand-in for our life's labor. Some get more of it than others, others don't get enough, and others can't seem to get the full value of what their life's labor is worth even at minimum wage. Not a great game if you're that bloke. Peer economy models are a new twist in the game for a lot of reasons. The first of which is that it banks on how digital communication has lowered the information and connection gaps between those that have labor to sell and those that are willing to give a fair exchange for it. The middle person is always there, building the brand or platform to connect seller and buyer (Uber or Lyft if you're looking for a ride), and some would like to exploit the new element of the game to cheat (some drivers that come to pick you up are also there to rob you or worse). So it remains imperfect, but it would have been otherwise impossible without digital communication when the means of production are distributed beyond those few capable of making large capital investments. The most exciting elements, then, are the transitions in all kinds of social practices—especially the changes in commerce, government accountability, and creativity.

***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?***

To think only about the digital obscures the hand hacking away at the keyboard, one mind reaching out to other minds; it forgets the human. I recently authored a small piece for the journal *Social Media + Society's* inaugural issue, which I think gets at what the digital might obscure as we focus too

enthusiastically on the medium and format (Postigo, 2015). It bears repeating here. Sometimes I think we're still mesmerized by the glow of the digital. As digital technology and media penetration continues to grow in scope, we will continue to be amazed by the many ways our daily routines, entertainment, and social arrangements reverse-adapt to digital platforms. To say that this particular technology is categorically more significant than any other technology that has changed our social patterns is not particularly interesting. It's the historically comparative argument that makes a better case for why we should be so fascinated by the digital and why we should maybe dig a little past our enthusiasm to see what is changing so fundamentally about our subject position and how that will impact the future.

I wouldn't be the first to talk about the parallels between digital technology, the printing press, and the Gutenberg Bible, but again it bears repeating and drawing the historical analogues. So students, when they sign up for a digital media studies course, should read first the histories that document the broader social, political, and cultural changes those technological changes wrought for almost all institutions in Western societies. Then we'd turn to the digital and all its attendant platforms and be a little excited and a little scared. Martin Luther nailing his 95 *Theses* on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, with their subsequent translation and printing, may not be unlike Edward Snowden giving evidence that the NSA has been spying on Americans for the past 15 years or Julian Assange's WikiLeaks project. It surprises me that Americans still don't quite understand the scope of what these men did. If history repeats itself in moments when the legitimacy of institutional power is challenged, then things will get very interesting in the next 50 years, and our students ought to at least have a sense of the arc of media history and the liberty that access to information wrought.

***In what ways do emerging perspectives on digital labor relate to the changing nature of narrative?***

This is a great question. Narratives are important. What I mean by narratives, and what I think you mean, is that they are stories about one thing or another told in a particular way. I'd add that they are stories we tell ourselves as well as one another. In 2003, when I first wrote about the shifts in labor practices present in digital media companies such as AOL, I was wondering what was happening to labor narratives. Before going to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute to finish my PhD in science and technology studies, I was a PhD student at Purdue University's American studies program. It was odd for a guy who wanted to write about the Internet to be in an American studies program, but they were very welcoming to those who showed a genuine curiosity about American culture, be it in the past or in the present.

Being close to Chicago, Purdue had very strong ties to labor history, so of course that was the lens I used to understand what it meant to labor in digital environments. It occurred to me then, and still does now, that we might want to return to old concepts about labor that had been settled as we turned the corner from classical Marxism to postmodernism and neo-Marxism. Harry Braverman's (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital* was a great place to start thinking about where labor had been on the eve of the collapse of the Bretton Woods Accords, when the U.S. dollar stopped being the gold standard for world currencies and was allowed to float with other currencies. Many were scared, but mostly we kept plugging along as an industrial giant, making cars, dishwashers, and whatever other gadget the world might need.

Before 1973, an American could conceivably drop out of high school, head to the mill or automobile manufacturing plant, and make a middle-class living. By 1980, that prospect was increasingly a fantasy and, by 1990, a complete delusion. So, what did we do? We turned to the service sector as the engine of American wealth and financial stability. Braverman's ideas about de-skilling became hard to apply to this sector as intellectual labor became increasingly important.

But what are the skills of intellectual labor? Certainly a machinist operating a lathe had, and still has, a tremendous amount of intellectual skill, so what had changed? That machinist had been replaced by numerical control and other processes that had automated his or her skill, but we did not yet have machines that could solve service industry problems as quickly and as creatively as the human mind.

To me, writing about AOL volunteers and their labor, it seemed that a re-skilling process had occurred as community became a commodity that needed people, skilled in the craft of human interaction, to maintain it. Digital labor then meant managing AOL online communities with people deft at human relations and able to navigate computer-mediated communication. To me, it seemed like craftwork, and I thought AOL volunteers should have unionized and joined the AFL-CIO.

The point I'm making here about digital labor is that it can't easily be understood with the alienation/cog-in-the-machine model. We own our minds and our social skills, and they are the means of production for companies that increasingly trade in the products of digital labor. Where would Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Vine, and YouTube be if it weren't for our minds on their platform liking and posting videos, pictures, text, and 10-second videos? Those things would be shelled-out ball-bearing factories like those I grew up walking past in my hometown of New Britain, Connecticut, "the hardware city." The old labor narrative changed but now is returning, I think, with a new form of de-skilling, driven by learning machine algorithms. But it's not quite over. If Facebook would like to quietly plant entertaining bots in the platform so that we are drawn to them and like and shop because of their convincingly human affect, then they had better pass the Turing test or else we'll unfriend them and stick to the profiles that we know come from bioware because we actually broke bread with that profile's owner. So, digital labor is a concept in the making. I don't plant my flag on it, and neither should anyone else. History has that covered.

***The digital realm often runs afoul of legal protections designed to protect professionally constructed narratives. How should media institutions react to amateur creations that infringe on their copyrights?***

I was asked this question by legal counsel for a major media company years ago. Months later I was invited to a panel discussion at Virginia Tech with the U.S. Associate Registrar of Copyrights, the Stanford X Entrepreneur in Residence, and other U.S. legal scholars, and we discussed the same question. In interviews, I've been called a copyright anarchist, and I may have come across as that to many of my colleagues in those venues.

People often have a terrible misunderstanding of anarchy. It's a deep philosophical concept, so when I say I'm not, it's not because I don't think it's a good idea. It's just utopian, and we're not there yet, so I'll stick to believing in well-thought-out and organically adaptive government oversight, policies, and services

as the best way to organize a complex society's production of intellectual property goods and markets.

That being said, I think media companies should let it ride when responding to infringing users. Users are creative, risk takers, and entrepreneurial. They take chances that would make media companies, worried about the bottom line from mass-producing mass media, soil their skivvies. When the iTunes music store first opened, I wondered why Steve Jobs didn't also include a music editor that could let users sample any song they bought on iTunes and make a new song or use it in their work and then upload it back to the music store for sale with a cut to Steve, the label, the artists, and the amateur. I mean wasn't the iTunes tagline something like "rip, mix, burn"?

If Apple had let it ride, it would have a business model in place now that would be making the company millions and would probably beat YouTube at the broadcast-yourself shtick, and we'd all have music not only from the pop artists on a label's catalog but also from our kids, nephews, cousins, and moms. The world would be a little more musical. Instead, when iTunes launched, songs came all locked up by digital rights management and licensing that was draconian at best. I was left thinking that Jobs (a) was shortsighted, (b) didn't think the music industry would go for it, or (c) felt that controlling the distribution and playback platforms would in the long term help him build up the Apple empire. Growing up, I always felt that in a multiple-choice quiz where I wasn't entirely sure about any one option, c was a safe bet. So I'll go with that this time around, too.

If Apple had let it ride on the users, then the peer economy would have been upon us 10 years ago. So let's not all feel so great about our iStuff. It's pretty and has great usability, but, taken together, iStuff constitutes a technological matrix founded on a copyright and patent model that gives Apple near monopoly power over how we consume, produce, and distribute user-generated music content.

If the creative industries continue along this path and governments continue giving them carte blanche to write intellectual property policy, we'll lose far more than art forms and expressions that trade on the universal language of the human experience—*Culture*, with a capital C. We'll lose scientific discovery that can cure disease, postulate solutions to fundamental questions about the physical universe, and move human knowledge forward. If I'm right about that, who wouldn't want copyright anarchy?

***How does your own conception of narrative play into the pro-consumer arguments brought forth by those in the digital rights movement?***

I think my answers above give some indication about how the pro-consumer idea can be relevant to my concept of a narrative. Briefly, I'd say that I follow legal scholar James Boyle's (2008) notion of culture and the individual genius, but I'll give you a riff to show off and illustrate my point. Poetry, like our daily bread, belongs to everyone. There you go. A riff on Roque Dalton's poem "Poetry Like Bread" translated from the Spanish with a mod on the "bread" to "daily bread" to reference a certain religious tradition contemplating the idea of a universally held need: Sustenance.

Boyle and others like him writing in the early 1990s deserve a great deal of credit. Boyle had the right idea over a decade ago when he concluded that the popular vision of a solitary genius, creating artistic

goods in isolation from the commons of culture, is a convenient fallacy embraced by industries that desperately would like to hold monopoly power over the production, use, and distribution of cultural goods. But human culture belongs to everyone, and no one has written, recorded, or painted the expression of an idea and not been influenced by some other cultural referent. It makes some sense to afford unique expressions of an idea some reward, but not monopoly, and definitely not for a "limited time" that gets longer every time Congress revisits copyright length and patent law. Time to just let go and roll back copyright to seven years at most. Frankly, three years would suffice in my opinion.

***How can individuals best use digital storytelling tactics for the purposes of activism?***

Interactive culture jamming sounds like something I'd love to see: mods to video games; or scripts for e-books; or splices into commercial digital audio or video that challenge normativity, injustices, and the awful phobias against difference in gender, sexual preference, and racial and ethnic diversity. Our collective ignorance about one another has become a nonsensical impediment for our growing as societies and a species. That idea makes me think of our collective humanity not as cultures or societies in isolation, but as diversity in species.

So the evolutionary biologist in me has opinions on why that's a good way to look at it. No species on this planet lacks diversity in its population. No species ever plateaus into a monolith. Diversity is the strongest guard any species has against the dynamic and destructive forces of unforeseen natural and self-made disasters as well as selection pressures and the vagaries of geological time. Human cultural and biological diversity is like diversity of any sort in any species. To say that humans are so special that we can discount diversity's importance to us as a species, as less important than diversity in fin shape among sharks, for example, is to assume a privileged position in the system we study and reduces the conclusion that we are exempt from recognizing the benefits of diversity to a tautology. On the other hand if, we accept that all aspects of human diversity, biological and cultural, are as important as appendages of one sort or other among species critically dependent on them for survival, then we have to contemplate that any cultural system that attempts to reduce culture to one meaning or a small collection of meanings about what it means to be human is, in my opinion, a terrible idea. So we have to resist that. We cannot embrace any monolithic perspective of what is the case about being human.

We all love to be right. We all love to be on top of the hill, but we have to make room for everyone. We just don't know when the time will come when the quietest voice in the room will be the most sublime, when the least among us will know the way when all others are lost. Betting on the best of what everyone brings to the table is not a sure bet, but it's the best bet we can make. So I'll bet on diversity.

Now let's not presume I'm thinking about moral relativism. I've always found Kant's categorical imperative is a pretty effective way to go about having a heuristic for what constitutes a human at his or her best. For the purposes of activism, then, I would say let's start with that and then intercede via media to tell a more expansive and complete story about the human experience.

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