

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

### Interview with Vladimir Barash

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

To be a little abstract, digital storytelling is different from other received forms of storytelling in that it is hyperlinked and highly interactive. The unique affordances of digital storytelling are the ability to connect disparate pieces of story via hyperlinks and the high level of interactivity it offers to participants. Other forms of storytelling allow for interconnection (via footnotes, references, etc.), but the ease with which one can create and change the target of a hyperlink, and the consistency of the hyperlink format, enable digital stories to create much denser reference networks than nondigital stories. Similarly, other forms of storytelling allow for interactivity (games need not be digital!), but the digital format allows all participants—not just the writer, the artist, and so on—to influence stories.

On interconnection: The density of networks of digital stories due to the use of hyperlinks is a difference not merely of degree but also of kind from nondigital stories. The networks of nondigital stories are sparser, and require more knowledge to navigate the links, than the networks of digital stories. As a result, networks of digital stories are much more widely accessible than networks of nondigital stories: It takes years of reading (acting, etc.) to create a mental map of a nondigital network of storytelling, but days or hours of browsing to map out a digital network of storytelling.

On interactivity: Digital storytelling is a potent tool for breaking down the barrier between the creator and the consumer of stories. Authors and readers (playwrights and audiences, etc.) have the potential to interact continuously, even synchronously, around the space of their stories. Not all choose to do so—with good reason!—but those who do can make storytelling interactive in a much larger-scale way than it can ever achieve outside digital media. Thousands, even millions, of users can participate in a digital story by commenting, editing, and interacting with other participants. Even at smaller scales, the ease of

interactivity provided by digital media allows stories that are normally one-sided—one creator working alone, occasionally interacting with a few editors, releasing a work to a large number of consumers—to become multisided, like a story being told around a campfire.

***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?***

Digital for me is any activity that is abstracted from its physical medium. Digital communication is interaction between people that is abstracted from the physical constraints of ears and mouths—writing certainly counts, as do telephone and modern telecommunications. Similarly, digital storytelling is the sharing of stories abstracted from the physical medium of co-proximity: stories told in virtual worlds, on message boards, in chat windows where the participants could be in the same room or halfway across the world, but the stories get shared all the same. Interestingly, digital storytelling is also abstracted from temporal synchronicity: Digital stories need not be told when everyone is in the “room” at the same time.

The affordances offered by digital media are incredibly empowering, from my point of view, to all participants in a story. The freedom from physical co-proximity means (relative) freedom from cultural constraints. When people gather around the campfire to tell a story, they tend to be from the same place and share similar values. When people gather around a digital space to tell a story, they can be from anywhere in the world, and the corresponding diversity of values is greater. This diversity makes for better stories. If you look at literature lately, there is a lot of hand-wringing from some folks about postmodernism and regurgitation of ideas and the death of literature. Nothing could be further from the truth: Those folk tend to be incredibly privileged, and distraught at the repetitive nature of stories for and by and of privileged people. Those stories, however, are just a grain of sand on the beach of life experience. The rest of the voices tend to get shut out by privilege, because they don’t have a North American/European education, because they’re not wealthy enough to be a professional writer, because they’re not White. Digital media help break down all those barriers—it is easier to get an education (and for educators to be exposed to new ideas outside the North America/Europe milieu); it is cheaper to write and publish and stories; and, most importantly, it is easier for people of different races and backgrounds to bump into one another and tell stories together. This is not to say that digital media erase identity—that would be a disaster for our global culture. To the contrary, I think digital media help the great diversity of human identities to express themselves, to shout about themselves and make themselves heard.

Secondary, yet still important, is the digital affordance of asynchronicity. Synchronous stories are limited by time. Asynchronous stories can last across lifetimes and can change as new voices join in. An obvious example is the novel, which can affect readers long after its author is dead; I would argue that fan fiction and other digital stories are an even better example, because they can *change* long after the author has died (or moved on to another project) and in so doing more accurately reflect the shift in participants. We are in an era of many living documents; combined with the Internet’s ability to archive, these documents add an evolutionary dimension to the previously static medium of text. When we read a novel, we treat it as a static object—there is a lot of focus on polish and editing so that the final product will be “perfect” enough to never change. When we read an online document with an edit history, we see the evolution of

ideas and words. Note that “evolution” does not necessarily mean “change from bad to good”—evolution itself does not have a purpose other than survival, and the most surviving texts can be vile or mediocre just as well as they can be brilliant. I would argue that regardless of our perception of a story at any given moment, the ability to engage in an evolving story is very empowering to all participants. In the past, it is true, groups of avid readers would discover and devour new novels, discuss them, and watch their collective interests and experiences change over time. Now, however, readers can do even more—they can directly influence the stories being written, they can take existing stories in a new direction with fan fiction. The shift from consumption and discussion to influence and co-creation empowers all members of a community to explore ideas and characters they love. In this process of exploration, readers and writers grow together rather than apart, and their stories reflect a harmonious integration of new themes and motifs into their fiction/critique—and of new ideas into their life experience.

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

Storytelling in my opinion is one of the primal ways of communication, and many of the core stories we tell (redemption, love, loneliness, togetherness, aging, travel) persist across media, cultures, and ages. That doesn't mean that all stories are the same—the amazing thing about storytelling is the diversity inherent in it—but it does mean that storytelling fulfills a fundamental human need to share feelings and experiences, and that need comes out in interactive stories over forum posts just as much as it did in the first stories around our first campfires.

This is one of the most amazing things about storytelling—that changes in medium and technology do not fundamentally transform the stories. In fact, I would be disappointed if we could no longer tell a certain kind of story with the advent of the Internet (or the next big technological transformation). Similarly, I would be very surprised if a certain kind of story emerged out of nowhere as its medium changed.

All that is not to say that stories don't change. The last few decades have brought about new genres, new literary tropes, new media for fiction. It's a wonderful paradox of storytelling that change happens constantly and keeps us, as a species, interested in stories—even as the themes and characters in new stories remain relatable. There is a continuity from ancient myths told before writing all the way to cyberpunk. There are plucky heroes, dastardly villains, and shocking twists, and those things excite us and touch us and trigger our imaginations just as much today as they did thousands of years ago. That's why forms of storytelling persist across not only platform but culture and time.

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

In the last decade or so, digital communication has been all about generating and storing ever larger volumes of information. Finally, in the last few years, we have started to help users filter and make sense of this information. It's not about big data anymore; it's about the user.

To me, this change is very empowering from a storytelling perspective. In telling digital stories, the more is often the merrier—the more stories people tell, the greater the diversity of perspectives on the story,

ways of telling the story, and presentations of certain characters and arcs. At the same time, as the number of stories increases, each individual story becomes the proverbial needle in the haystack. A user looking for fan fiction on a particular character from a novel has to navigate through all the fan fiction about that novel, maybe also about the novel-derived TV series. What's worse, as the number of stories increases, popular themes emerge and come to dominate the space. A user looking for fan fiction on minor characters will keep bumping into fan fiction about major characters. This sort of collective honing in on a few popular elements obscures the true diversity of interests in a subject: Readers think that only certain characters matter, and writers are afraid to write about the characters that "don't" matter because their work will never be read.

Today, search engines, RSS aggregators, and social networks act as early artificial intelligences, helping us make sense of the glut of information and find the different voices within. These tools are far from perfect—having been built mostly by straight White men, they encode a certain set of hidden biases that make it harder for other social groups to use them and to find and curate the content they seek. Still, I think these tools are a step in the right direction. With tagging, search, and community building, users can find the stories they're interested in and engage in active dialogue around those stories. The reader can become the writer of the fiction she wants to write.

In the coming years, I think we will see these tools get smarter and more respectful of their users' needs. Native Americans will be able to use their names on Facebook without having to provide their ID ("Facebook Don't Believe," 2014); women and minorities will be able to share their stories on social media without being harassed (see Gamergate<sup>1</sup>); and users, regardless of sex, gender, race, orientation, and class, will be able to find the stories they want, not just the stories privileged people think they want. Moreover, smarter tools will help marginalized groups bring their stories to prominence and topple hegemonic narratives. I am looking forward to the next decade as a decade of liberation and participation, a time when stories will be able to bring people together on an equal, community-oriented basis.

***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?***

A focus on the digital tends to obscure our identity. On the Internet, it seems, anyone can have a voice, it is a perfectly egalitarian platform. The appearance of egalitarianism can be dangerous—it can be harder to spot biases and gatekeepers when "anyone" can use a social network service, create an avatar to represent their likeness, and freely participate in storytelling.

To give the proper kind of attention to these issues, we need to be mindful of them, educate ourselves about them, and speak about them. I will give a few examples that will, hopefully, help us educate and be mindful and encourage us to speak up.

In truth, digital media are just as human as nondigital media, and they create the same kinds of barriers

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate\\_controversy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate_controversy)

for marginalized people as the latter. It is misleading to think that anyone can use a social network service because it's free—not only does the use of one presume near-constant Internet access, the kind that comes with a costly home Internet plus cell phone subscription, but the process of getting an account can be much harder than it seems. Most services require an e-mail address to sign up; e-mail clients can be work-provided (and thus require the kind of job that provides e-mail access); paid for (and thus a financial privilege); or supported by big social media companies that give out “free” e-mail accounts to people who have an active cell phone (also costs money) and/or are willing to submit their data to corporate scrutiny. Many marginalized folk live (rightly) in fear of large organizations, that will almost always put profit first and the rights of their users second.

Let's say you've registered and are telling your story online. How do you present yourself? Are the avatar options supported by your storytelling platform inclusive of your identity? What about disability: Can you still participate even if you are differently abled—for example, have vision problems? Does your platform make it possible, ideally easy, to meet people with similar backgrounds and experiences, so you can make a community together—or are you inundated by posts from privileged folks whose life is nothing like yours?

Finally, digital stories tend to obscure the impact of the words that comprise them. Even people who are successfully participating in a community can feel isolated, alienated, and outright pushed out based on how other storytellers/readers respond. Digital media services spend a lot of time improving their uptime and latency—admirable goals, of course—but relatively little time fostering a productive and supportive community. Lately, services have begun to change for the better, by adopting stricter and more mindful codes of conduct, for one, but we still have a long way to go. The Gamergate scandal has brought to light both how easy it is to harass on Twitter and how little Twitter does to protect its users from harassment. We need to do better. The responsibility is everyone's—harassers need to stop harassing; services need to make it easier for victims and bystanders to block and report harassers; and communities small to large need to enforce policies that have zero tolerance for hateful and harassing speech and actions. The most privileged among us have the most to give—we should be at the forefront of making our communities safer, not standing back idly and waiting for this problem to sort itself out.

***How can emergent communication codes like emoticons and emojis contribute to digital storytelling?***

Emergent communication codes like emoticons enrich communication. I was coauthor on a research paper (Park, Barash, Fink, & Cha, 2013) that discovered that an emoticon can have nuanced meaning contextualized by the culture of the writer. For example, we found that German Twitter users were more likely to use an ☹ emoticon when talking about money than users from other countries.

When it comes to digital storytelling, this sort of nuanced meaning allows story participants to share information more quickly. Natural language has continued to evolve with the advent of digital media—different languages evolve in different ways, but as Park and colleagues (2013) found, many languages have picked up emoticons as a way of translating emotional expressions. This translation is especially critical in the context of digital storytelling, where (in most cases, for now), text media do not capture the tone, rhythm, or facial expressions associated with face-to-face storytelling via speech. Emoticons allow us

to bring some of our tone and facial expressions to text communication media, creating a layer of rich context on top of the words written. At the same time, these communication codes allow us to abbreviate emotional expressions and squeeze more meaning into fewer characters. Ultimately, I think this trend of enrichment and abbreviation will continue, with digital storytellers using ever more acronyms, shorthand, and characters to tell (and react to) stories.

I do not think that abbreviation will elide the rich meaning that “slower” communication modes can convey. The rich context provided by emoticons, LOLs, image macros, and so on serves the same function that caption drawings, turns of phrase, and private words served in longhand letters of old. Just because we can tell stories more quickly does not mean that those stories are somehow poorer in meaning than novels or oral stories. It means that our communication and storytelling capabilities are evolving.

***What are the most significant ways that stories, messages, and ideas spread through digital networks? How do we map this spread?***

There are many ways—but I will talk about two here. One is centralized, broadcast spread, where a media source (or a popular individual) disseminates a story to its audience (e.g., Twitter followers). The other is distributed, where many (relatively) less popular sources spread the story together. Both ways are very important to the spread of stories, and we can map them by looking at the social and information networks over which stories spread and by using a combination of visualization, quantitative analysis, and qualitative methods to track the diffusion of the story over the network.

Broadcast tends to be great for quick reach and quick growth. Memes and news stories can become popular overnight when a celebrity or mainstream news source broadcasts the message to its huge audience. The downside of broadcast is the constant revolution of the news and meme cycle: Messages broadcast by celebrities do not tend to be “sticky”; they do not generally affect the long-term behavior of their audience (see research that demonstrates that celebrities, on Twitter at least, do not influence their followers to adopt new behaviors any more so than the average Twitter user; e.g., Goel, Watts, & Goldstein, 2012). The other downside of the broadcast is that it really requires a very popular user (or users) spreading the messages; these users, by the very nature of their popularity, have a lot of demands on their attention and time. Accordingly, it is very difficult to convince a popular user to adopt your message—unless you’re one of the privileged few that know celebrities on a personal basis.

Distributed spread can effect lasting change. Grassroots campaigns such as #bringbackourgirls and #BlackLivesMatter are calls for social justice and action that are spread in parallel by many relatively unpopular individuals. Sometimes a celebrity will signal-boost the distributed diffusion process, turning it for a short time into a broadcast, but even in that case the cause often comes to the celebrity’s attention because of an existing grassroots movement. Distributed messages are especially powerful because they can generate multiple reinforcements on exposed individuals, increasing the likelihood that the individual “adopts” the message and joins the movement behind it. Multiple reinforcements are just multiple friends telling you to do (or believe) the same thing: If one of my friends tells me about #bringbackourgirls, I might be interested, but not pay it much heed; if five of my friends talk to me about it, I might spread the hashtag myself, donate to a relevant organization, and support the movement to bring back girls and

women kidnapped by Boko Haram in other ways (such as writing about them in this article). With a broadcast mechanism, multiple reinforcements are less likely since most of the message passes directly from one “star” (celebrity) to his or her large audience, who do not pass it along further.

The disadvantage of distributed spread is that it can be extremely difficult to get started. In the beginning, the message is spread by just a few people with small audiences; they need a compelling idea and aggressive outreach to spread the message further. Happily, as my own research has shown, there is a critical mass point relatively early on, after which the multiple reinforcements begin to do most of the work of spreading the message in an organic way. The critical mass point can be as small as 1%—or less!—of the target population size (Barash, Cameron, & Macy, 2012). My research identifies the conditions that a social contagion (in other words, a message or story spread in a distributed way) needs to reach critical mass, and I am currently part of a group of scientists testing my theories on empirical social contagions.

***You’ve taken snapshots at various times of impression management processes on Facebook. How do individuals manipulate online social networks such as Facebook manage their personal stories?***

The study you mention was inspired by Erving Goffman’s (1959) notion of speech as social performance. Facebook gives another stage for that kind of performance—a way to talk about oneself in a positive light without being obvious about it. Few people actually self-aggrandize on Facebook, or if they do, they frequently get ridiculed for it; most people self-promote in subtle ways such as “humble-bragging”—for example, “Oh it’s so terrible that I have to work late as a powerful corporate lawyer.”

In short, social networks are wary of any explicit, broad-strokes manipulation attempts. People tend to feel ownership and control over their personal social networks, and when a manipulator—whether an individual or a company—intervenes, the reaction is often one of frustration, if not outright anger. However, it is very important in this case to distinguish between manipulation and fighting back. For example, in the Gamergate scandal, women in tech are accused of manipulating games journalism to unethical ends, of creating an echo chamber and twisting the truth—when it is their accusers who twist the truth and try to smear these women’s (and men’s) public personae!

To help distinguish between these two cases, I challenge the notion of manipulation in this context. Most individuals and organizations engage in self-promotion, face-saving, and impressing their friends—on Facebook or at board meetings or at dinner parties. I don’t think that is manipulation at all. I agree with Goffman that this is performance. Manipulation is something more sinister, and often associated with the abuse of power relationships, when an individual (or group) in power obscures the truth or changes his or her account of it to preserve the status quo.

***How do you think off-line cultural environments influence the way individuals tell stories online?***

In significant ways. For example, one research group I was part of looked at how people use emoticons.

We found that the way people use the same emoticon can differ drastically from culture to culture. For example, Germans used ☹ emoticons to refer to money problems, but other cultures—European, American, Asian, and Oceanic (sadly, no African data)—did not. This may seem like a small example, but it has far-reaching consequences. When a person you're chatting with types in a chat window, the meaning of that emoticon is determined not only by the characters but also by the writer's culture.

In another context, times of crisis and upheaval can strongly affect the medium of storytelling. During the Arab Spring, famously, the government of Egypt tried to restrict all access to the Internet in the country. This measure did not stop the social movement, but people had to use other means—cell phone communication, proxies, and nondigital methods—to tell their stories and come together. This is a powerful example of how the advent of the Internet did not fundamentally change the kinds of stories we tell, but it gave us new ways to tell those stories.

### ***How do individuals use narrative or storytelling structures to maintain connections online?***

I would argue that all communities are at their core about shared stories. The community of U.S. Republicans (to the extent that there is one community) shares certain stories about fiscal responsibility, conservation, heritage, and tradition; the community of U.S. Democrats (again, to the extent that there is one community) shares certain stories about helping everyone, the role of government in assisting its citizens, and civil liberties. These shared stories have migrated seamlessly online. In some ways, the existence of specifically delineated spaces such as forums or chat groups has made it even easier for people to organize around shared stories online. To bring it back to fictional stories, I think that the Internet has enabled people to create a new kind of story that is specifically suited to online interactions and that helps maintain connections online: sprawling, distributed, ongoing. I'm thinking of long forum threads, fan fiction, and similar narratives. Unlike novels, which have a clear beginning, middle, and end, these narratives are meant to go on and on so long as there is shared interest in them; at the same time, people frequently contribute to the story with encouragement, comments, and sometimes even collaborative storytelling.

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