

# Digital Stories of Community: Mobilization, Coherence and Continuity

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores approaches to digital storytelling in community groups and compares two different approaches to digital storytelling projects. It asks questions about whether digital stories made in communities can be coherent, sustained, and mobilizing. It starts with a theoretical position from Ricoeur and later employs a perspective derived from Actor-Network Theory to explore the issues. It suggests that storytelling workshops will have limited success in producing sustainable community stories, and reports on partial achievement of coherence, mobilization and continuity in a research project which gave a more central place to the evolving community story itself.

## Keywords

Digital storytelling, community, story, hypermedia Actor-Network Theory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Community stories

According to Paul Ricoeur [15, 16], a community, through imaginative work, can frame a story of itself which will reflect and sustain its own projects in the world. Building on a theory of metaphor, he sees imaginative work as temporarily eroding the boundaries between remote semantic fields, schematizing metaphorical attributions, and thereby providing the basis for a redescription of the world. Although such a redescription is essentially *fictional*, it will unfold new dimensions of reality, taking us beyond earlier descriptions into new understandings and new possibilities. Stories, poems and other kinds of fiction go beyond factual descriptions because they get to the essence of action. Through the use of techniques established and appreciated in a community of hearers – practices, for instance, of abbreviation, articulation, and condensation - they can achieve ‘iconic increase’ – a remaking of reality in a richer vein. In their telling and retelling, says Ricoeur, stories have the capacity to reflect, unite, and mobilize a community.

Ricoeur further develops his analysis towards action, examining first the grounds of action (individual and intersubjective), and then the general imaginative practices by which a society remakes itself (the realm of the ‘social imaginary’). A move is made from narration to action, from description to projection, whenever someone borrows a story’s structuring capacity to form a *project*. Ricoeur sketches a progression from schematization of projects to the articulation of possible actions. To move beyond individuals’ plans of action to intersubjective action, he uses Schutz’s analysis [17] of relations with contemporaries, predecessors and successors, simultaneously to embed the individual in the field of historical experience and to achieve the imaginative transfers (I to you, us to them, here to there) characteristic of *empathy*.

In his examination of the more general imaginative practices that constitute the social imagination, Ricoeur analyzes two opposed but interlocking practices: *ideology* and *utopia*. The one confirming the past and the other opening toward the future, these two are bound together in an irreducible tension and become pathological if separated.

In this paper, we stop short of considering the social imagination, and focus on the role and potential of story in smaller communities – local communities, or communities of interest. In addition, we focus on the potential and process of using computers to make community stories. Can they have the unifying and mobilizing effects Ricoeur suggests?

### 1.2 Digital storytelling

The rapid development of multimedia and hypermedia technologies has opened up new avenues for making stories on computers and computer networks which hold great promise for individuals and community groups with a story to tell. The precipitous rise in power and fall in cost of computers, and the availability of low cost digital cameras, editing software, and the Internet have brought tools for creating and publishing stories within the practical and financial reach of many people. With multimedia systems, images, sound and animation can be brought together with texts, providing a platform for a range of story formats combining literary and video elements.

Furthermore, and of particular interest in the community context, it is possible to create hypertextual forms with multiple narrative threads running through them, so that stories can be produced which include many voices and styles, opening fresh channels for self-expression and collaborative creativity in community. A new sort of story comes into view, with contributions from many authors, and without a single editorial line. It need not be linear, nor even finite. Among the questions that arise here are: how can such stories be created; can they be coherent; can they be sustained; and will they mobilize the community?

## 2. DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECTS

### 2.1 Workshop/studio approaches

A leading figure in the development and spread of digital storytelling is Joe Lambert [11]. He, together with Nina Mullen and Dana Atchley, developed the *Digital Storytelling Workshop* in California in the 1990s, and he co-directs the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California. The workshop is a training and arts program which has been run in many venues around the world, and through participation in the workshops several thousand people have by now been able to create their personal digital stories.

The emergence of this approach is described in the book *Digital Storytelling* [11]. It revolved at the beginning around a convergence of Lambert's activities in radical community theatre and Atchley's desire to find a way of performing the story of his life, which he called *Next Exit*, and which reflected twenty years of his touring America with a story-based roadshow. The video presentations of *Next Exit* that came out of their collaboration sparked in many people in the audiences a desire to do the same sort of thing themselves. The Digital Storytelling Workshop emerged out of Lambert and Atchley's commitment to help people tell their own stories, and out of their own embrace of emerging digital technologies for doing this work.

The workshop has evolved into a successful three-day event in which participants are guided to find their story, to script and storyboard it, and to produce it on the computer. There is a set of guidelines for story composition. Participants are asked to consider seven elements when constructing their story: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, voiceover, soundtrack, economy and pacing. Though Lambert insists that story coaching is a dynamic and not a prescribed process, and that storytelling is a collaborative art, his approach embodies a particular notion of story which can be seen to draw on a traditional vein of storytelling as (individual) performance. The stories produced are short, linear, personal stories - stories with point, direction and finish.

Lambert's method has grown out of a heady mix of radical theatre, roadside Americana, performance, participation, and new technology. The visionary or evangelical nature of the project can be seen here:

'I came to understand that the mix of digital photography and non-linear editing are a tremendous play space for people. They can experiment and realize transformations of these familiar objects, the photos, the movies, the artifacts, in a way which enlivens their relationship to the

objects. Because this creative play is grounded in important stories the workshops participants want to tell, it can become a transcendent experience.' [11, pp. 10-11].

The Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) (and the more recently formed Digital Storytelling Association (DSA)) provide a base and network for supporting and linking digital storytelling projects around the world.

The approach and method of digital storytelling developed by Lambert and his partners has influenced other projects, including, in the UK, the *Capture Wales* project at BBC Wales, led by Daniel Meadows [14]. Finding Atchley's *Next Exit* on the web (<http://www.nextexit.com>), Meadows contacted CDS, attended one of Lambert and Mullen's workshops in California in 2000, and subsequently successfully proposed the *Capture Wales* project to the BBC in Wales.

*Capture Wales* is a digital storytelling project, one of whose purposes is to connect the BBC more closely to communities in Wales. Stories are made in *Capture Wales* workshops hosted in community venues, and collected on a website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/capturewales>). Meadows describes the process thus:

'*Capture Wales* workshops typically run for five days over a three-week period. The first two days are about script construction and image capture. The intensive three-day production workshop comes at the end. The team of trainers includes a project manager, a script expert, a video editor, IT support and a creative director (that's me). We also have Welsh-speaking experts. This team delivers the skills to a group of participants who will have presented themselves for a workshop either through attending one of our public meetings or by filling an application form on the website.' [14, p.190].

He gives some detail of the story making process in these workshops, in which Adobe Premiere is used as the video-editing package.

Reflecting on the wider impact and implications of the project, he comments that the

'...Digital Storytelling project has tried to develop itself in a robustly sustainable fashion. We are not just a visiting roadshow. By being part of a wider digi-nation project, *Capture Wales* participants can visit one of growing number of BBC community studios and continue to make films long after the initial workshop is over. It is true, though, that in the long run, as we attempt to nurture this new form of cultural experience, we will need to make more community partnerships. If the revolution is to mean anything, Digital Storytelling must be properly sustainable.' [14, p. 193].

### 2.2 A community storytelling research study

Our own research project called *True Stories* [1, 2, 3] is more modest in scope and accomplishment than the approaches described above, but we think a comparison between them might be fruitful because we have approached the question and potential of digital storytelling in a different way. Starting from a Ricoeurian theoretical perspective, as sketched at the beginning of

this paper, we set out to explore how a community group might use the emerging digital technologies to tell the story of the community - rather than the stories of individuals within the community. We were aware of and influenced by Lambert's work, but wanted to undertake a longer term investigation of how a group might formulate its story and put it on to the computer. We had no fixed idea of or rules for the structure or dynamics of a story, but wanted the community group to determine what constituted a story for it.

The main fieldwork discussed here relates to the St. Pauls Carnival Association in Bristol (U.K.). The St. Pauls Carnival Association organizes an annual Afro-Caribbean Carnival in the St. Pauls area of Bristol, as well as carrying out other general educational activities. It had at the time of the fieldwork a paid lead worker and an organizing Committee but it has always relied heavily on the contributions of volunteers.

To prepare for entry into the space of the investigation, and for the introduction into it (by us) of an unfamiliar kind of computer system, we derived a second theoretical stance to supplement Ricoeur, from Michel de Certeau [7], which led us to expect that people's engagement with an extraneous technology would take on a certain subversive and opportunistic character which Certeau calls 'tactical'.

Once working in the research space, we sought to establish a pattern of cooperation which would foster participation by members of the community group in the story making project and would define a facilitative (rather than a directive) role for the researcher. The Freirean model of 'co-production' [9] came to represent a desirable mode of working in this kind of project.

Members of the Association collaborated in bringing their experiences and perspectives together to produce a story of the Carnival on computer (using hypermedia and multimedia software, chiefly Macromedia *Director*, and Adobe *Photoshop*), which was sufficiently well formulated after a few months' work for them to write it on to a CD-ROM for use at the 1998 Carnival. The CD-ROM has been used since by the Association to showcase its work to the wider community and to other community groups.

### 3. THE TWO APPROACHES COMPARED

One revealing way of analyzing projects which involve the deployment of technology is to use perspectives from Actor-Network Theory [6, 13]. This is an approach developed in the sociology of science and applied particularly to the analysis of work in laboratories or on large technological projects. It can perhaps be applied more generally to the analysis of sociotechnical configurations, especially because one its chief features is its removal of the theoretical or analytical separation of technology from social context. This then leads to a focus on the interaction between a range of actors enrolled into a network, which will typically include people, machines, and texts. How such a network is established, mobilized, stabilized, and sustained then becomes a more central question than the inner detail and workings of the social or technical processes viewed separately.

From this perspective we can make some immediate observations to address the questions of mobilization, coherence, and continuity raised in this paper's title and opening analysis.

With regard to the Digital Storytelling Workshop approaches discussed above, it is possible to see that they are very effective in mobilizing individuals to participate in a workshop and in producing coherent stories of individuals' lives. There is an efficient enrolling process, and coherence is guaranteed by the workshop scheduling and the strong steer on story construction. The workshops do not in themselves, however, mobilize *the community* either immediately or in the longer term. This is because of the focus on the individual story and the short, sharp nature and purpose of the workshop. The actor-network for these workshops is a complex but effective mixture of machines and software, a few experts, the participants and their local venue, and a charismatic workshop leader (Lambert/Meadows). In the *Capture Wales* case, the BBC is a significant actor stabilizing the network and colouring the direction of the overall project. In the parent Californian project, the CDS and the DSA occupy a similar stabilizing position for the longer term continuation of the wider project. However, in both these cases, there is no real sense of the *stories* being important actors in the network, or having any connections or continuity within the broader storytelling project. The stories are rather individualized or atomistic *outcomes* or *products* of the workshops. The workshops are short-lived actor-networks which are assembled for the purpose and dismantled when the stories are produced. The people, the equipment, and the texts are dispersed. Although the stories are skilful accomplishments for the individuals who produce them, and may continue to have significance in their lives, they have no intrinsic continuity within the actor-network in which they were produced, since that network has been discontinued.

Both the original Californian Digital Storytelling project and its Welsh offshoot explicitly seek to create community. We want to suggest that the workshops in themselves, conceived and operated as at present, cannot achieve this directly. There seems to be a tension between *capturing lives* and *creating community*. The workshops assist individuals to implement cameos of their lives on the computer, but it would seem that to achieve the desired end of creating community, attention should be redirected towards linking the stories together, and building a longer-lasting actor-network across the workshop, and finding ways of continuing the

stories into the future. In these projects, this might be achieved through development of the CDS/DSA and the BBC community studios. It might be through these agencies that longer-lived and more communal stories are produced. A different kind of actor-network will be needed, in which a community's evolving story needs to move into the central place currently occupied by the charismatic stranger riding into town to conjure stories or 'deliver skills'.

In the *True Stories* project, on the other hand, while there has been nothing like the effective empowering of individuals achieved in the digital storytelling workshops, it would be fair to say that here, the *story* has become the central actor, and also that the community members have achieved more autonomous roles than if they had been enrolled into a workshop leader's vision of the nature and purpose of story.

The actor-network in this case comprised the members of the Carnival Association, especially those who became involved in the story making project, and particularly the Carnival Coordinator, who took a lead in it; the researcher/ facilitator, who served as a link between the people, between the people and the machine, and between the people and their own story; the computer, with the hypermedia software loaded on to it, which eventually became the main site for making the story; and the plans and designs of the story on the office walls and other surfaces, which both prepared the story for transfer to the computer and provided a running commentary and focus point for those involved in the work, and for visitors.

The network stabilized sufficiently to produce a CD version of the story for a deadline, but began to dissolve afterwards. The facilitator left, and the equipment returned to the University. The story of the community itself did not end at that point, but the telling of it in this way was suspended, because the energy necessary to sustain the network was no longer present.

With regard to the desirable characteristics of mobilization, coherence, and continuity, there are queries in relation to all three, which are further discussed in the following section.

## 4. LOOSE ASSOCIATIONS

Reflecting on our experience in *True Stories* so far, in relation to the specific case study we have reported, to comparisons with other approaches to digital storytelling in community, and to the various theoretical perspectives we have used, we make the following observations.

- In the production of a community story by a coalition of community members working with a facilitator and general hypermedia tools, the process of development might be better described as *discovery* rather than design [2].
- Participation is hard to establish and hard to sustain in such a project, but was in this case sufficient to keep the work moving.
- The facilitator, the emerging story itself, and the story as implemented on the computer, became important focuses around which participation revolved.

- The story produced on CD-ROM was integrated in its top-level structure, but the small constituent stories which made it up were only partially interconnected.
- Users' engagement with the technology remained tactical.
- The community was only partly mobilized by the story making.

There is a common theme linking these observations, one which might be termed *loose association*: the participants are loosely associated, and so are the parts of the story; the users are loosely associated with the technology, and the community with the story. These features, we suggest, are related, and reflect what we imagine will be an increasingly common encounter, that of a loosely connected group of people with an open ended technology in an open ended project. Part of this looseness stems from the hypertextual character of the story produced in this project. While this permits the emergence of a multivocal story, it loses the coherence afforded by the linear, single-voiced kinds of story produced in the storytelling workshops described earlier.

### 4.1 Hypertension

It was George Landow [12] who made the observation that a hypertext was like a digital collage. Hypertext, he says, shares with collage features such as juxtaposition, appropriation, concatenation, assemblage; blurring limits, edges and borders; and blurring distinctions between border and ground. He goes on to say that there is a crucial distinction between collage in painting and hypertext, which is that hypertext is virtual and not physical:

'Digital text is virtual because we always encounter a virtual image, a simulacrum, of something stored in memory rather than any so-called text "itself" or a physical instantiation of it.' [12, p. 166].

The virtuality of digital text in turn gives rise to its unlimited adaptability and reconfigurability, and to its openness, unfinishedness, borderlessness, replicability, and capacity for rapid distribution.

Viewing hypertext in this light, we have to ask how feasible or productive it is in fact to try to connect community and hypertext. Does the virtuality and boundlessness of hypertext make it an unsuitable vehicle for telling the stories of real communities (where people and events are infinitely variable, but nevertheless finite, to adapt an observation of A S Byatt [5])?

Paul Edwards, following observations by Bolter [4], also notes the same key difference between a hypertext and a book: '...hypertext offers the ultimate in intertextuality: the possibility of endless interpolations, additions, and revisions with other texts; the limitless proliferations of versions whose relation to the "original" may become literally undecidable.' [8, p. 262].

Edwards suggests that two conflicting arguments are made for the superiority of hypertext over print media: one that hypertext is a better 'mirror of nature' because it makes explicit the semantic networks that comprise human knowledge; the other that hypertext is superior to written documents because of its malleability - because it allows users to find individual paths through texts and to create and modify hypertexts to reflect their own private cognitive framework. Edwards refers to a 'hypertension' between contrasting positions - one universalizing

and one individualizing - which is not at first glance readily resolvable. That a resolution is assumed possible by hypertext designers, he suggests, reveals an implicit (social) psychological theory in which individual and social versions of knowledge are unified. Hypertext holds two distinct 'moments' in productive tension: a communicative/social moment in which individual perspectives can be incorporated in a single socially constructed whole; and a cognitive/individualist moment in which private worlds are liberated from oppressive social conformity.

Donna Haraway [10, p. 128] welcomes Edwards' idea of hypertension as a useful third term between cognition and communication, which allows a 'fruitful blurring of boundaries between inside and outside, human and machine, subject and object'. Edwards himself points out the parallels between the implicit cognitive theories underlying both hypertext and actor-network theory - which reinforces our interest in the applicability of the latter to the study of how hypertexts are produced and used. [8, p. 267].

As we have mentioned before, the hypermedia story produced by the Carnival Association was only weakly interconnected below the integrated top-level interface. We can see this as a preference for little stories which refer to one another but resist being subsumed into one large story. We can also see it, now, as reflecting the hypertension between social and individual knowledge, which will tend to limit the development of the free interconnectivity of which hypertexts are capable.

## 4.2 Co-production *in absentia*

In our earlier pieces reporting on the *True Stories* project and particularly the Carnival Association fieldwork, we wrote about the difficulty of establishing effective participation in this kind of project. The difficulty was not that participation was blocked by differentials of power and expertise, as may often be the case in conventional information systems development projects. It lay instead in a shortage of resources and the uncertain and open-ended nature of the work.

We had difficulty finding a community group to work with in the first place, because the project was novel, and specific in ways which did not accord with customary expectations about projects with IT. Once we had a partner, it was difficult to establish a working group to take the work forward, and hard to get any preliminary work on the story done before the computer arrived. When the work did get started, too much reliance was placed on the researcher, who wanted a facilitative role but was expected to take a lead.

As the project proceeded, as participation spread and leadership passed to members of the Association, the work moved closer towards a Freirean 'co-production'.

We found the process of establishing a pattern of participation frustrating, but can now see why it needed to be slow and tentative. An actor-network was being established in new territory. It is remarkable that a sufficient degree of participation and co-production could be achieved to carry the project forward when people met one another so infrequently, and rarely as a team, and when so many contributions were minimal and occasional. We can now see that this rested on the dynamism of a handful of individuals, arrangements which made small contributions possible, the availability of the researcher/facilitator as a point of reference, the presence and availability of a central

artefact on which the story was being developed, and the maps and notes visible on the walls and other surfaces. The coherence of this network over a period of time made it possible for people to drop in and out of the project, and effectively to engage in co-production *in absentia*.

## 4.3 Incomplete Mobilization

It is interesting from this vantage point to reflect on the theoretical positions we brought to our project from Ricoeur and Certeau. Ricoeur's analysis of the development of imaginative practices shows imagination as the foundation of social action. He suggests a path leading from a theory of the imagination through to practical action in society. We took from Ricoeur the idea that stories can move a community towards action in the real world because of their capacity to reflect, unite, and mobilize a community.

From Certeau we took the distinction between tactical and strategic engagement, which he uses to characterize the respective situations and possibilities open to owners of a territory or system on the one hand, and users on the other. We applied this to an understanding of how the people we were working with would engage with the technology we were introducing. We started with an idea that users would, when they were comfortable with the technology, shift from a tactical to a strategic engagement with it.

Neither expectation was entirely fulfilled in the project, and it is now possible to see why. The loose associations we have identified in the several aspects of this project will delay, perhaps indefinitely, the uniting and mobilizing of a community through story, and the move from a tactical engagement with technology to a strategic one. The diffuse nature of participation in this kind of project, as well as the tension between the social and the individual which is present in the use of hypertext, will limit the convergence of views anticipated by Ricoeur. The same factors will tend to act to hold the use of the technology at the tactical level.

Actor-network theory shows how a project of this kind can work even when actors are only partially engaged and the network is of low intensity. The possibility of an increase in energy and focus which would move the community to a mobilized, strategic position is always present, but because the networks are continually reforming, such an outcome would be temporary and provisional, not an endpoint.

Even if the telling of a community story does not produce unity, Ricoeur's theory still gives a useful framework for understanding the relation between imagination and social action, as does Certeau's for understanding how people operate in alien territory. In fact, dropping the expectation of a unitary or strategic end frees us to observe more closely how loose associations form and operate.

We are freed also to contemplate the possibility that stories themselves should not be final. The life of a community, so long as the community exists to tell its story, is unfinished, and therefore the story of the community is always unfinished. From the point of view of a designer, coherence and finality are desirable attributes of a story. But just as design is only a moment in a longer voyage of discovery, so a 'finished' story can only be a temporary stabilization of an actor-network with an uncertain future.

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