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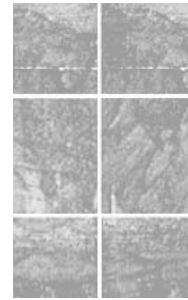
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REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

Digital Storytelling: research-based practice in new media



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In January 2001, Professor Ian Hargreaves, Director of the Centre for Journalism Studies (CJS) at Cardiff University and former editor of *The Independent*, proposed to BBC Cymru Wales that it 'create a project which uses digital, multimedia storytelling in Wales as a way of connecting the BBC more closely to communities'. The project was, and is, Digital Storytelling, a research-based project I had been developing over the previous year in the department's 'digilab', a unit set up in 2000 to explore the use of multimedia in journalism and other forms of public communication.

In April 2001, at *Platform*, a multimedia conference in Cardiff, Menna Richards, controller BBC Cymru Wales, announced the launch of a Digital Storytelling pilot (a video recording of her statement together with my presentation that day can be seen at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/platform/platform2001.shtml>) and three months later we ran the first *Capture Wales* workshop. By any standards, this was quick work. We were fast tracked then and we are fast tracked now. What we wanted to do pressed all the right buttons. The pace has never slowed. In January 2002, BBC Director General Greg Dyke visited our new, portable digilab at Broadcasting House in Llandaff and, shortly afterwards, the project was given a three-year rollout. Since then we have run at least one workshop per month in a different town or village across Wales. We have also trained two teams to work on a pilot project in the English regions.

Digital Storytelling makes use of low-cost digital cameras, non-linear editing software and notebook computers to create short, multimedia stories. These are essentially personal stories and are made for publication on the internet (which explains, with current technology, why they must be short), although, if output to tape, they are capable of achieving broadcast quality. Digital Stories are not quite like any previous form of broadcast material – yes, they look a bit like films even though they are not 'movies' since, for the most part, they are made with still pictures. Yes, they are like radio-with-pictures but – with production values that come from

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the scrapbook rather than the studio – they certainly do not look like television.

Digital Storytellers make their films on the kitchen table from stories based on their family photo archives. Stories that have previously been shared only with family and friends now gather on the *Capture Wales* website [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/capturewales/>] and the jigsaw that is the bigger story of our time and our country, the bigger story that gives another perspective on who we are, is revealed. Light shines on an invisible nation.

Digital Storytelling is not easy to do but it can be learned. *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 10 participants who will have presented themselves for a workshop either through attending one of our public meetings, or by filling in an application form on the website. We have worked with people who have never used a computer, people with learning difficulties, people with mental health problems, and with asylum seekers. We have worked with farmers, social workers, librarians, teachers, retired folk, children, and all sorts. Anyone can make a Digital Story because everyone has a story to tell.

There are many non-linear video-editing packages. The one we use is Adobe Premiere because it has a relatively uncluttered screen and comfortably combines video and graphics. Figure 1 shows the way Premiere divides the screen into three windows. At the top left is the Project Bin or – as our American colleagues (who like to make a comparison between Digital Storytelling and cooking) sometimes call it – the 'kitchen cupboard'. Across the bottom of the screen is the Timeline (or the 'cookpot') where the ingredients are mixed. In the top right is the Monitor where we 'taste' what we have done. Currently cooking is the opening 10 seconds of *Scissors*, the film I use for leading the training. The audio track plays the opening lines of my voice-over:

Here storytellers are learning how to drag the images and sounds from the Project Bin into the Timeline and perform a 'scrub preview':

They say the camera is a clock for seeing – a time machine – and that, when we're photographed, the birdie we watch sees us with eyes that are yet unborn. By this reckoning, then, the photo album becomes a tomb. Time's coffin, with a glass lid. So here I am, peering into a fragile album of my grandmother's. What I can see are scissors ...

The idea of Digital Storytelling is new to the UK but it is well established in the western United States, and it was there, at the Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS), Berkeley, California [www.storycenter.org], that I attended my first workshop – described, with true Californian bravado, as a



Figure 1 The opening 10 seconds of *Scissors*.

'bootcamp' – in October 2000. CDS is run by Joe Lambert and Nina Mullen and was founded in the early 1990s in partnership with the late Dana Atchley whose website *next exit* [<http://www.nextexit.com>] contains some of the finest examples of the genre. This type of work has its roots in community arts and oral history; it stretches from pre-literacy cultural traditions. One of our objectives in proposing it to the BBC was that it would extend the corporation's track-record of 'listening to the voice of the people', something which it began in Manchester in the 1930s with the radio work of Olive Shapley and continued, somewhat falteringly, in the post-war era through the Radio Ballads of Charles Parker and Ray Gosling's documentaries of the ordinary. More recently, at the millennium, the BBC teamed up with the British Library to bring us *The Century Speaks* (now available on the internet at [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/century/cspeaks.shtml>]), a huge oral history project carried out by local radio. The 'voice of the people's' most impressive televisual expression was probably BBC2's *Video Diaries*. To all of these we owe something.

Digital Storytelling, however, differs from all of these in one important respect: contributors are not just originating their own material, for the first time they are editing it too. This is what first excited me – and still excites me – about Digital Storytelling, for no longer must the public tolerate being ‘done’ by media – that is, no longer must we tolerate media being done *to* us. No longer must we put up with professional documentarists recording us for hours and then throwing away most of what we tell them, keeping only those bits that tell our stories their own way and, more than likely, at our expense. If we will only learn the skills of Digital Storytelling then we can, quite literally, ‘take the power back’. Not for nothing is the computer we use called the ‘PowerBook’. ‘Think Different’ the Apple advert tells us. Digital Storytelling isn’t just a tool; it’s a revolution.

Tools are intrinsic to social relationships. An individual relates himself in action to his society through the use of tools that he actively masters, or by which he is passively acted upon. To the degree that he masters his tools, he can invest the world with his meaning; to the degree that he is mastered by his tools, the shape of the tool determines his own self-image. Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision. Industrial tools deny this possibility to those who use them and they allow their designers to determine the meaning and expectations of others. Most tools today cannot be used in a convivial fashion. (Illich, 1979: 34)

Until now broadcasting, especially television, has been – as Illich had it – an ‘unconvivial tool’. For television-as-we-know-it ‘acts passively upon individuals’. What Digital Storytelling does is open up the possibility that individuals can turn the television experience around, become its ‘active master’.

To us at Cardiff University, the BBC, with its public service remit, seemed the obvious partner for developing Digital Storytelling in the UK, as Ian Hargreaves’s paper had it; the benefits to all concerned seemed considerable:

For the BBC:

- Fresh output for BBC Wales digital TV and internet-based services;
- An original and sustainable contribution to community self-expression;
- A new way for the BBC in Wales to connect with communities, not in a top-down corporate manner but through a project which depends for its delivery and success upon action within communities;
- Opening up new lines of talent in journalism, script-writing and visual skills;
- A project capable of high profile and strong marketing themes.

For Wales generally:

- Access and teaching for Welsh people in the latest multimedia

technology and the creation of sustainable bases for the further deployment of a technology vital to the future;

- A boost to the Welsh creative economy – which is a crucial aspect of the development of the so-called ‘new economy’ in Wales;
- Digital Storytellers believe that in telling stories, communities and individuals assert their identity and escape from the confines of dominant images generated by mass media, which is obsessed by celebrity. Digital Storytelling raises community self-esteem.

For the Centre for Journalism Studies:

- An opportunity to apply its knowledge on the ground and to research the project’s progress, which could provide hugely valuable examples for the spread of community use of digital technology elsewhere.

Since that was written (January 2001), the BBC Cymru Wales Digital Storytelling project has tried to develop itself in a robustly sustainable fashion. We are not just a visiting road show. By being part of a wider digitisation project, *Capture Wales* participants can visit one of a 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.

One of the functions of the research-based practitioner is to ‘make real’ – that is to rehearse in the field – some of the academic debates that rage in the classroom, in the journals and in the conference halls. For me, living out those debates has been one of the richest experiences of this project. In the long run, the value of research-based practice will be measured by two criteria: ‘Does this piece of research advance knowledge?’ and ‘Does this piece of research make an intervention in the field that changes the way others do their work?’ In regard to Digital Storytelling, the answer to both these questions is emphatically ‘yes’.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

DANIEL MEADOWS is author of *The Bus* (Harvill Press, 2001). He lectures in New Media and Photography in the Centre for Journalism Studies at Cardiff University. His work can be seen at [<http://www.photobus.co.uk>]

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