

Digital storytelling as a genre of mediatized self-representations: an introduction

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Abstract

This article provides a critical review of some of the most relevant studies on digital storytelling and proposes a genre typology that allows an initial classification of digital storytelling into two main types: educational and social. Digital storytelling is a multimodal emergent genre characterised by its versatility and flexibility which has resulted in a series of subgenres. However, the main premise here is that differentiating between social and educational— although one does not exclude the other— and bearing in mind that most digital stories may lie at the intersection of both, is the most useful way to start labeling the massive production of digital stories available nowadays on the Internet. The articles included in this number are mostly educational (Ramírez-Verdugo & Sotomayor Grande, and Reyes, Pich & García, Londoño-Monroy) but they all include some traces of the social type. Thus, Bou-Franch is an example of how students interpret certain events that had social impact and that are part of history while Westman's article involves the creation of communities of practice among those who share the same interests. Finally, Herreros-Navarro, although educational in essence, describes a social act in which students intentionally choose a way to present their own identity to society using digital storytelling.

Keywords

Digital storytelling; multimodal; education

Relatos digitales un género de expresión personal mediatizada: introducción

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Resumen

Este artículo ofrece una revisión crítica de algunos de los estudios más relevantes sobre relato digital y propone una tipología de género que permite una clasificación inicial en dos grandes tipos: educativo y social. El argumento principal es que la diferenciación entre lo social y educativo, aunque uno no excluye al otro, ofrece la posibilidad de clasificar la producción masiva de relatos digitales disponibles hoy en día en Internet. Los artículos incluidos en este número son, en su mayoría, educativos (Ramírez-Verdugo y Grande Sotomayor, y Reyes, Pich & García, Londoño-Godoy), aunque en todos ellos todos ellos incluyen algunos rasgo de lo social. Bou-Franch nos habla de las estrategias utilizadas por los estudiantes en la interpretación de acontecimientos históricos que tuvieron impacto social; mientras que el artículo de Westman conlleva la creación de comunidades de práctica entre aquellos que comparten los mismos intereses. Por último, para Herreros Navarro el relato digital es un acto social en el que los estudiantes deben decidir como quieren que la sociedad les vea ya que describen y exploran su "o" a través del relato digital.

Palabras clave

Relatos digitales; multimodal; educación

I. Digital Storytelling: a multimodal way of telling stories

Couldry (2008) argues that there are many different types of Digital Storytelling (DS), which, in its broadest sense may be understood as an example of multimodal narrative. McClean (2007), for example, focuses on the narrative power of visual effects in film while Miller (2004) centres on the creative opportunities of interactive entertainment (cited in Lundby 2008, pp. 1). Here, we understand DS according to the now classical model of Digital Storytelling developed by the Centre for Digital Storytelling in California (see section 2 below) and best understood as short multimodal stories made with inexpensive equipment and mainly about personal experiences.

According to Kaare and Luntby (2008, pp.106) "these stories do not fit into formal theories of narratives from literature and film studies" using self-sourced images and told with the author's own voice. Although some of the definitions that one finds "may suggest an additive character of DS, that is as the result of adding multimedia elements to a written or oral narrative," as Hull and Nelson (2005, pp. 225) argue, "multimodal composing is not an additive art; a multimodal text can create a different system of signification." Scheidt (2006) adds that DS should not be understood as a phenomenon equivalent to either oral or to written narratives: DS creates a new composition. Lundby (2008, pp. 1) summarises its characteristics as: a) short, just a few minutes long; b) made off the self-equipment and techniques with inexpensive productions; c) small-scale stories, centred on the narrator's own personal life and told in his or her own voice.

Robin (2006) classifies digital stories into three main types, personal narratives, documentaries, and inform or instruct discourse (Robin, 2006), while Gregori (2011) includes a fourth type, socio-political digital storytelling. To these, many other subtypes could be added. However for the sake of simplification, we propose here a differentiation between two types: a) social b) educational, which, without doubt account for the vast majority digital stories that can be found on the Internet.

II. Classic model of Digital Storytelling originated in the Centre for Digital Storytelling: the personal and social dimension

a. Social commitment

The model initiated by the Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS), which is the point of departure for most applications of DS, emerged as a celebration of the "creative expression of the common folk, of the non-professional artist" (Lambert 2010 pp. 79). Lambert (2010) admits that although the expansion of DS into a wide variety of practices such as marketing, education technology etc., is inevitable, the result in many cases situates this type of work "outside a social change framework [...] missing the point about DS entirely. Thus creations of this kind are imbued, at best, with a "thin, superficial veneer" of social commitment" (2009, pp.82).

The logo of the CDS claims that everyone has a story to tell. For them, the practice of digital storytelling enables autonomous and creative intercourse among persons in an intent to promote social change. Since their beginnings, the CDS has undergone many changes, especially noticeable is the launch of its new website in 2012 where a great variety of workshops are offered: Educator Workshop, The Embodied Story Workshop, Stories-for-Health Workshop, iPhone Workshop, Snapshot Story Workshop, Facilitator In Training Workshop and a Certificate Program. This has meant an expansion of DS to many different contexts, thus favouring a "direct or indirect confrontation with the dominant culture and representative authorities" (Lambert 2010, pp.82).

b. The democratic dimension of digital storytelling

In its origins, there was a strong democratic motivation underlying DS (Lambert 2010, Erstad and Silseth 2008, pp. 217) since its intention was always to allow unheard voices to be heard. Although they recognize the democratic potential of DS, authors like Couldry (2008) and Erstad and Silseth (2008, pp. 216) express their reservations about the impact of DS in the "real world".

There is no doubt that DS is the result of storytelling interacting with society. McWilliam (2009, pp. 151) argues that the discourses circulating around DS are "substantively constructed, circulated

and sustained in institutions, among participants and within texts." These three basic elements (institution, participant and the texts they produce) constitute dichotomous parameters that reflect different uses of DS: a) public vs. private sectors; b) cultural or economic motivations; c) expressive vs. instrumental pedagogies. These elements are represented in a continuum and, at the same time, include other factors shared between different institutions. The question is, however, whether digital stories surpass the limits of the institutions in which they are created and have any impact on the making of (social and cultural) meaning and also if they have any social consequences. That is, does DS have "implications for the sustaining, or expansion of democracy"? Does it contribute to social and cultural transformations which, as argued by Couldry (2008, pp. 46) can only happen under complex conditions? Couldry (2008) uses the term "mediation" and Hjarvard (2008) "mediatization" to refer to the transformative power of the media and the broader effects of DS. Couldry differentiates between both mediation (Martin-Barbero 1993; Silverstone, 1999; Couldry 2000) and mediatization (Hjarvard, 2004; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 2004), choosing mediation in order to express "the overall effect of media institutions existing in contemporary societies, the overall difference media make by being there in our social world" (Couldry 2008, pp. 46)

In this vein, Westman (this number), offers an analysis of digital stories created to celebrate grass roots cricket. The production process of the digital stories described by Westman is different from the classical model as described by CDS (cf. section 2.3 below) by CDS in that the stories are researched and created by project staff. Westman analyzes said stories using Gell's (1988) theory of art. He reaches the conclusion that through their creation participants form complex communities of practice.

c. The workshop

The model introduced by the CDS with Dana Atchley, Joe Lambert and Nina Mullen, which was further developed by Daniel Meadows (2003) in the United Kingdom is workshop-based. It involves a 3 to 5-day workshop in which participants are provided with games and guided through the process of telling their story (Lambert, 2010).

As digital storytelling develops, so do the techniques it employs. As Lambert (2010) explains their:

[...] emphasis over the years has been to help storytellers find the story they want or need to tell, and then help them clearly define that story in the form of solidly written script. For many storytellers, this process of clarification has proven to be a transformative experience.

To this, Lambert (2010) adds that their new approach to digital storytelling incorporates new techniques:

[....] we are helping our storytellers fully visualize their story as a finished piece before they begin to write their script [....] during our group process called the Story Circle [....] we want to help each storyteller not only find and clarify the story being told, but also check in with them about how they feel about it, identify the moment of change in their story, then use that to help them think through how the audience will see and hear their story in the form of a digital story. And finally, after the Story Circle is completed, and the storyteller has had some time alone with his or her thoughts, they can then let all of these considerations inform them as they sit down to write.

Taught and learned from person to person the model proposed by Atchley, Lambert and Mullen reiterates their commitment to both social change and the individual. Their logo is that everyone has a story to tell; CDS treats stories as acts of self-discovery.

III. Educational Digital Storytelling: school-focused

We understand educational digital stories as school-focused, produced and developed within the school context and as part of the academic curriculum which engage in formal schooling applications of DS at primary, secondary and tertiary level. In these contexts, as expressed by McWilliam (2009, pp.152), DS is often seen as a tool in "building media literacy, narrative development and self-presentation skills, but also means engaging students who might otherwise be struggling socially and/or intellectually." In this number and from the point of view of a university lecturer Bou-Franch analyses stories produced by Spanish undergraduates of English Studies for the module *History and Culture of English-speaking Countries*, during the 2011 spring term. Bou-Franch points out that stories fluctuated from the discourse of factuality to the discourse of subjectivity and argues that factuality allows students to display their knowledge while subjectivity allows the inclusion of creativity and entertainment elements.

Barrett (2006) argues that digital storytelling fosters reflection and that reflection helps to enhance the effectiveness of learning and:

facilitates the convergence of four student-centered learning strategies: student engagement, reflection for deep learning, project-based learning, and the effective integration of technology into instruction.

Along the same lines, Bendt and Bowe (2000) draw up a list of ten reasons why we should pay more attention to storytelling:

it inspires dedication, encourages creativity to work, promotes problem solving, embraces diversity, captivates attention, piques interest in writing, fosters group dynamics, addresses different learning styles, creates a positive classroom climate and incorporates the multiple intelligences.

What most authors point out is that DS has brought about an activation of more informal and collaborative ways of learning which imply active participation between teacher and students (Castelló 2002) thus enhancing a student-centred focus in the educational context (Erstad and Silseth 2008, pp.214); and with society (Gregori-Signes, 2011).

Reyes-Torres *et al.* in this number, describe a didactic sequence which uses digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool with students of EFL. DS is seen as an adequate tool to help students improve their language skills in specific situations within common daily interaction. The results indicate that digital storytelling is evaluated as a positively both by teachers and students. In particular, they point out its potential to motivate students and to help them learn from their mistakes by improving teamwork and giving them the opportunity to get to know their classmates better, to negotiate their ideas and to make decisions.

Along the same lines, Ramírez-Verdugo and Sotomayor Grande describe the potential of digital storytelling to teach literary narrative in primary school. The schools where the project is carried out use CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) as a teaching method and ICTs are also employed as pedagogical tools. Despite the initial reluctance on the part of the teachers involved in the project, the results seem to indicate that once teachers and students experienced the use of DS in the classroom directly, they coincide that DS can contribute positively in a CLIL learning context by providing the necessary means to improve linguistic, literary, cognitive, social and cultural competences while promoting the acquisition of discipline-specific content.

a. Student: self-reflection and agency

Erstad and Silseth (2008, pp. 214) focus on digital storytelling and *agency*, and affirm that on the one hand, DS provides an opportunity for individuals to become agents and to be more visible. On the other, they affirm:

when young people are given the opportunity to blend the informal 'cultural codes' with more formal ones in their own learning processes, agency might be fostered in a new way, with implications for democratic participation.

They understand agency "as the capacity to make a difference" (Castor and Cooren, 2006 in Erstad and Silseth 2008, pp. 216), which links directly to other educational uses of DS as a tool that "can help promote critical thinking and self-and group-reflection by bringing school and society together" (Gregori-Signes 2013). The concepts of agency, identity and self-expression have become the hallmark of DS. Valkanova and Watts (2007) use it in order to promote self-reflective language in seven year old children (Bjorgen 2010) who produce video diaries about their own everyday classroom experiences in a science course.

In this number Herreros-Navarro analyses stories produced by secondary school students following the principles of classical narrative theory, filmic narrative; cognitive and psychological processes. Herreros-Navarro uses personal digital storytelling as a tool that makes students think about their identity as human beings. Through this activity the students reflect not only about themselves but also about the potential audience for their stories. This entails, undoubtedly, having to decide on the public image that they want the narrative to transmit, thus encouraging students to organize their own ideas about their own self-identity.

A similar perspective is taken by Londoño-Monroy who also analyses digital stories produced by secondary school students. She analyses the possibilities that DS offers when formally implemented in the curriculum. Her conclusions indicate that DS helps students modify or change their roles. They become creators instead of consumers and thus more active. The implementation of DS motivates learners by offering a student-centred model backed up by a multimodal tool which helps students put into practice several competences (cf. Pennock-Speck, 2009).

IV. ICT's and Digital Storytelling

For the last decade one of the main concerns in school education has been the implementation of information and communication technologies. DS has been reported as a more personal approach to digital technologies while facilitating the development of "student-centered learning environments" (Jonasse and Land 2000 quoted in Erstad and Silseth 2008, p. 215). DS is used as a means to promote the development of competences such as research and writing skills, organization skills, technology skills, presentation skills, interpersonal skills, problem-solving skills- and in turn they develop: digital literacy, global literacy, technology literacy, visual literacy, information literacy (cf. Robin 2006, Barrett 2006).

As argued by Gregori-Signes (2008) "with the advent of new technologies and their consequent integration within the curriculum teachers need to find attractive activities to substitute and complement more traditional ones." DS promotes the use of Web 2.0 technology for educational purposes while teaching students both traditional and innovative storytelling techniques. Students learn how to combine basic multimedia tools (e.g., animations) with activities as varied as doing research, writing and delivering presentations (cf. Robin 2005, Barrett 2006).

In this number, Robin and McNeil provide us with a blueprint for the successful creation of digital stories within an educational context. The insights they provide are the product of years of experience gained through teaching, giving workshops and supervising research into digital storytelling. The article provides guidelines on every aspect of digital storytelling, that is, their analysis, design, development, implementation and assessment.

V. Final remarks

This article has provided a critical review of some of the most relevant studies on digital storytelling and has put forward a genre typology that allows an initial classification of digital storytelling into two main types: educational and social. The articles in this number are mostly about experiences with DS in educational settings as DS is still strongest in the world of education. It is clear, however, that it is impossible to separate the two types completely; educational stories are not divorced from the social context they are created in and stories with a more social bent in

the wider social context also have message to convey and, as such, are partly pedagogical in nature.

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