"Playing with the Team": The Development of Communities of Practice in a Digital Storytelling Project

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Abstract

Since its emergence in the early 1990's, digital storytelling has been variously identified as a new media practice, a consumer and community-led movement, and a textual system. However, given its relative nascent status, there remains the need for further academic research focusing on the different forms it has assumed. During the spring/summer of 2011, I conducted an examination of Taking the Field (TTF), a digital storytelling project that aims to celebrate grassroots cricket in the UK through the construction of stories by village and county-level clubs. In contrast to most previous projects that aim to have the participants "speak" by constructing their own stories, TTF stories are researched and constructed by project staff with the assistance of the clubs.

My research centers on the experiences of two clubs in the project, Blaina CC and Spondon CC, through interviews and elicitation techniques with club and community members using the completed stories and the artifacts used in their construction. Through the theoretical framework of Gell's anthropology of art, I consider how digital stories act as objects that mediate social agency during their creation and how the structure of this type of project contributes to the formation of communities of practice in the 'performance' of collective identity.

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Keywords

Community; Learning; Performance; Anthropology; Agency.

I. Digital Storytelling and the Taking the Field project

The Taking the Field (TTF) digital storytelling project is a two-year venture jointly run by the University of Glamorgan's George Ewart Centre for Storytelling and the Marylebone Cricket Club in St John's Wood, London. The latter, in addition to operating as a playing first-class club, is also the framer and guardian of the official Laws of Cricket globally. The stated aims of the project are to "to reflect the diverse nature of cricket in both the UK and Sri Lanka, as well as the character of cricket clubs and the communities they serve. It will chart the changes of both good and bad, experienced by clubs and communities over the past century."('About Taking the Field,'2011)

Over a six-week period in May/June 2011, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with the TTF project manager, Ms. Emma Peplow, at their headquarters at Lord's Cricket Ground and with two participating clubs in the project. The first club, Blaina CC, is located in a small town in the former iron and coal producing areas of the south Wales valleys, and was the pilot club involved with the project. Their stories had been completed and uploaded to the project website. The other club, Spondon CC, is based in a village on the outskirts of Derby, and was just beginning to be interviewed by Ms. Peplow.

In the well-known Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS) model, a digital story is a short (<5 minutes), narrated first-person story, created through the use of video and graphics (Lowenthal, 2009). Stories made by the TTF project differ slightly in that the project manager has editorial control, as she creates the stories by compiling and editing together interviews and photos collected from club members.

To date, a substantial amount of the literature on digital storytelling has focused on its potential for increasing participation and self-representation at the individual level. The definitions and descriptions ascribed to the practice embed it in the community media movement and the emancipatory strands of applied new media (Carpentier, 2009). However, the processes of institutional mediation in storytelling projects, like TTF, also require further examination. As Thumin observes, an inherent paradox is that "part of the very processes of institutional mediation shaping invited self-representations is an understanding of mediation itself, precisely, as something to be minimized in order for participants' realities to come across (Thumin, 2009)."

As a composition of many different medias, digital storytelling is also a composition of different expressive practices. Technologies are meaningful acts of social engagement with the material world that express and contest social values and judgments. The experiential nature of technological practice allows for the production of knowledge, skills, and values (Dobres, 2000). The production of these artifacts and their use exists in socially constituted and materially grounded contexts, not in the abstract (Dobres, 2000).

The stories told through the TTF project therefore are not simply copies of 'existing' stories told in a new format, but entirely new artifacts created through their positioning in time and space. Narratives inevitably will involve selectivity, the rearranging of elements, re-description, and simplification in the reconstituting of events concerning the narrator's life or the history of the wider community (James 2006, Hinchman and Hinchman 1997). By participating in TTF, clubs are engaging in a 'performance', which necessitates embodied techniques (e.g. recollection and communication) that act as a platform for creating and expressing identity and differentiation (Dobres, 2000).

II. Gell's Theory of Art

My primary interest was in exploring how TTF digital stories, as effacious agents, acted to mediate social relations during the process of their creation. In positing that the cultural significance of objects and those who make and use them is situated in how technical acts and gestures materially unfold in a social milieu, my research questions were structured through the analytical framework of Gell's anthopological theory of art, in which he argues that "art objects are the equivilant of persons, or more precisely, social agents." (Gell, 1998)

As art object status is not institutional, nor aestehtical or semiotic, but rather theoretical, the anthropological theory of art merges with the social anthropology of individuals and their bodies (Gell 1998). Agency as a process involves indexes and effects, in which indexes stand in a variety of relations to artists, prototypes, and recipients (Thomas, 2001). Gell goes on to clarify these terms as follows within his art nexus (see Appendix I):

- Indexes: material entities which motivate abductive inferences, cognitive interpretations, etc.
- Artists: to whom are ascribed, by abduction, causal responsibility for the existence and characteristics of the index.
- Recipients: those in relation to whom, by abduction, indexes are considered to exert agency, or who exert agency via the index.
- Prototypes: entities held, by abduction, to be represented in the index, often by virtue of visual resemblance, but not necessarily (Gell, 1998).

III. The Process of Creating Stories

In applying Gell's art nexus to the CDS model, the relationship would be correctly expressed as *[[Artist-A]->Index-A]-->Artist-P*. The storyteller, as artist, is a patient with respect to the agency s/he exercises, as otherwise artistic agency cannot proceed (Gell, 1998). The embodied experience of creating a self-narrative, that is, the individual's bodily engagement with the material and social conditions associated with creating a digital story, helps allow them to explore themselves and their place in the wider social community (Dobres, 2000).

We again invoke Gell's art nexus in order to describe the more complex relations occurring during the creation of TTF digital stories. This expression, *[[[Prototype-A]->Artist-A]->Index-A]-->Recipient-P*, refers to a nexus of agent/patient relationships so that the recipient is the patient and the agent acting on him/her is the index. The digital story is an index of the "appearance" of the club, which is mediated by Ms. Peplow's performance in creating the index (e.g. types of questions, her perception of key themes, etc.) which mediates the prototype to the recipient (audience). In considering this entire expression, the ultimate source of agency would seem to rest with Ms. Peplow (prototype), as she is not seen as responsible for the compelling aspects of the story (the club's history, accomplishments, etc.) (Gell, 1998).

IV. Communities of Practice

Due to the unique structure of this project, I would argue that what emerges are communities of practice within the participating clubs. This concept, first proposed by Lave and Wenger, refers to groups formed by individuals who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor. There are three crucial characteristics for communities of practice: domain, community, and practice (Wenger, 2009).

- Domain

Communities of practice have an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. In this case, it is in the perpetuation of memories, values, and relationships relating to the club, that is, the club's 'identity', through the creation of digital stories as material artifacts. As a 'person', the club is a 'spread of biographical events and memories of events, and a dispersed category of material objects, traces, and leavings" (Gell, 1998). These objects are distributed throughout different individuals, and so although outsiders to the community may not necessarily recognize them as expertise, the collective competence of others is valued within the group. An example is former club members being asked to return and be interviewed (Wenger,1999).

- Community

Through the pursuit of their interest in the domain, community members engage in activities and discussions, share information, and help one another. By discussing memories, sharing photographs, and locating data, the historical archiving being undertaken entails a great deal of communal interdependence, although they may not interact on a regular basis (Wenger,1999).

• Practice

Members of a community of practice are practitioners, and so they will develop a shared portal of resources (e.g. tools, experiences, etc.). This requires time and sustained interaction, and the development of shared practice may not be self-conscious. I believe that the reflexivity needed to participate in storytelling, in evaluating and assessing varying accounts and materials, contributes to the shaping of this practice. In this sense, certain people may be seen as skilled at remembering particular eras or at organizing old scorebooks, so that they take on roles as communal resources (Wenger, 1999).

Learning requires participating in the community of practice. This participation 'refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities (Wenger, 1999). Although Ms. Peplow possess the technical abilities needed to produce a digital story, as someone entering the "culture" of the club, there is a need for her to see how the qualified practitioners of the club's culture behave in order to impart this when she later edits the stories (Brown et al. 1989). During the interview process, she is not directly participating (for the most part) in the 'performance', but at the same time, is learning a great deal from her position.

V. Conclusions

Digital storytelling is a useful topic through which to evaluate two concepts for understanding the broader social consequences of media (including new media) : mediatization and mediation (Couldry, 2008). Due to its complexity as both a narrative and social process, digital storytelling presents the opportunity to clarify the respective advantages and disadvantages of these concepts while attempting to form an understanding of the social life of digital stories themselves (Couldry, 2008). As Couldry observes,

> Digital storytelling represents a novel distribution of a scarce resource – the ability to represent the world around us – using a shared infrastructure...People who have never done so before are telling personal stories through digital forms, storing and exchanging those stories in sites and networks that would not exist without the world wide web and which, because of the remediation capacity of digital media, have multiple possibilities for transmission, retransmission and transformation available to them (2008).

As the concept of mediation has a substantial history and has been used in multiple contexts (Couldry 2008), Silverstone's definition is most useful for our purposes:

> Mediation, in the sense in which I am using the term, describes the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication (the press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the world wide web), are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life (Silverstone, 2002, pp.762).

He clarifies this definition by observing that an understanding of mediation requires an examination of how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them, the relationships formed by institutions and individuals to the environment, and the relationships to each other. Mediation is therefore a non-linear process (Couldry, 2008). Mediatization is "the processes through which core elements of a cultural or social activity (e.g. politics, religion, language) assume media form" (Hjarvard, 2007). Schulz breaks the term down into four processes: extension, substitution, amalgamation and accommodation. However, this in turn affirms a linear structure of transformation (Couldry 2008). Instead, I see mediation as a better tool through which to understand digital storytelling, since it permits the capture the range of dynamics within media flows, including those of production, circulation, interpretation or reception, and recirculation (Couldry, 2008).

Therefore, to consider the sociality of digital stories, it requires the acknowledgment that as a media they are articulated both as a technology of transmission and representational content

(Couldry, 2008). Accordingly, this requires a discussion on how both the contexts and process of story production for TTF relate to what are considered accepted practices and interpretative styles of digital storytelling in general. Furthermore, this approach necessitates understanding how the TTF project's outputs are circulated and exchanged amongst various stakeholders (Couldry, 2008). In order to acheive this latter objective, I observed activity on the TTF Facebook page and their recently unveiled website (see Appendix II).

By hosting the digital stories on its website and Facebook group, the TTF project hints at the possibility of participatory storytelling beyond the completion of the original artifact. The ability to post comments and construct conversations from these comments could lead to a future scenario in which "story drafts" are uploaded by institutions and then discussed and revised during the production process. Stories on similar themes, but by different authors, could also be situated side-by-side as a method to engage reflexivity. In the case of institutional storytelling, the producer is acknowledging his or her entry upon the world of the subjects, but is soliciting them to imprint directly upon the media aspects of their own community and culture. By permitting them greater access, the corrections, additions, and illuminations that only the subjects' responses to the material can elicit are made possible (MacDougall, 1998).

As future clubs may choose to produce their own stories, the idea of the quality outcome may be complicated as framed self-representations would be judged alongside the professionally produced outcomes on the TTF website. Individually-generated content may be perceived as more "authentic" or as less objective than that produced by the institution. This situation evokes Gell's assertion that "culture may dictate the practical and/or symbolic significance of artefacts, and their iconographic interpretation, but the only factor which governs the visual appearance of artefacts is their relationship to other artefacts in the same style (Gell, 1998)."

The outcomes of TTF are important because the representations of the clubs that are produced under the auspices of the project must therefore meet the standards of the supporting institutions and the expectations of the anticipated audience for a certainly quality of text. At the same time, it is also vital that the participants, as members of the audience, have a positive experience of working with the project and the institutions (Thumim, 2009). As Emma explains, participants will both self-edit and provide feedback directly to her to ensure a positive depiction:

> "People didn't want to say anything that would offend people....These being cricket clubs, there's lots of stories they won't tell me which might be because I'm a woman and they won't tell me what they got up to on tour. They're aware its a public forum and its going up on the internet. There might be certain embarrassing stories they don't want told. There is that awareness that it's going on line and there may be that when you get something on line it's difficult to get rid of it. Everyone I've interviewed I've been able to put into a digital story They have corrected a few things that I've done. I've named people wrongly for example."

Mitcham states that "technology is not so much the application as [it is] a form of knowledge, one persistently dependent on technical skill" (Mitcham, 1994). It can be said that the current and future participants in TTF will have varying levels of the technical skills needed to produce digital stories, and thus also distinct stores of knowledge as far as their comprehension of how these artifacts came into being. Consequentially, one must consider Gell's point that "the attitude of the spectator towards a work of art is fundamentally conditioned by his notion of the technical processes which gave rise to it, and the fact that it was created by the agency of another person, the artista" (Gell, 1992). An area that warrants further anthropological investigation is evaluating how the power of digital stories, as artifacts of 'historical record', stems from the technical processes they objectively embody depending on varying degrees of enchantment of technology (Gell, 1992).

By extending the theoretical framework of Gell's anthropology of art to the digital story, it has been shown these artefacts act to mediate social relations during their creation while also highlighting the processes and practices associated with different storytelling styles. Digital storytelling, as a technological practice, is not simply the activities and physical actions guiding the production and use of the story as artifact. It is an "unfolding of a sensuous, engaged, mediated, meaningful, and materially grounded experience that influences individuals and collectives to comprehend and act in the world as they do (Dobres, 2000).

Appendix I: The Art Nexus

The Art Nexus and the Index   29

Table 1. *The Art Nexus*

	AGENT			
	Artist	Index	Prototype	Recipient
Artist	Artist as source of creative act / Artist as witness to act of creation	Material inherently dictates to artist the form it assumes	Prototype controls artist's action, appearance of prototype imitated by artist. Realistic art.	Recipient cause of artist's action (as patron)
Index	Material stuff shaped by artist's agency and intention	Index as cause of itself: 'self-made' / Index as a 'made thing'	Prototype dictates the form taken by index	Recipient the cause of the origination and form taken by the index
Prototype	Appearance of prototype dictated by artist. Imaginative art	Image or actions of prototype controlled by means of index, a locus of power over prototype	Prototype as cause of index / Prototype affected by index	Recipient has power over the prototype. Volt sorcery.
Recipient	Recipient's response dictated by artist's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. Recipient captivated.	Index source of power over recipient. Recipient as 'spectator' submits to index.	Prototype has power over the recipient. Image of prototype used to control actions of recipient. Idolatry.	Recipient as patron / Recipient as spectator

(The left side is labelled **PATIENT** spanning Artist, Index, Prototype, Recipient rows.)

(Gell, 1998, pp. 29)

Appendix II: TTF Facebook Wall Dialogues

Taking the Field

Our first digital story from Spondon, and a fitting one. Secretary Kath Green tells us why she decided to digitally archive all of Spondon CC's records - a decision which led to Spondon being chosen to be one of the first clubs to take part in TTF

Spondon CC's Archive: Going Digital
Length: 2:23

Like · Comment · Share · July 21 at 8:49am

4 people like this.

Dan Willoughby Superb - what a fantastic example of how good a digital story can be.
July 21 at 10:47am · Like

Taking the Field Cheers Dan! Looking forward to seeing some from you and Rodley :)
July 21 at 2:46pm · Like

Dan Willoughby The ball is rolling! Hopefully get some info online next week!
July 21 at 4:03pm · Like · 1 person

Write a comment...

Taking the Field

Morning morning. We now have the short version of the second Spondon ground series on the website: www.takingthefield.com/stories/spondon-ccs-ground-2-royal-hill-road-locko-road You fine facebook followers also have the extra special longer version to enjoy. Do let me know which you prefer

Spondon CC's Ground (2): From Royal Hill Road to Locko Road | Taking the Field
www.takingthefield.com
Marylebone Cricket Club, Lord's Cricket Ground, St John's Wood, London, NW8 8QN | Project enquiries: Emma Peplow | 020 7616 8734

Like · Comment · Share · August 25 at 11:38am

Kathleen Green likes this.

Kathleen Green Hi Emma I think I probably prefer the longer one as there is so much of the story included in it.
August 25 at 5:05pm · Like

Taking the Field Cheers Kath, I appreciate your thoughts :) It was a bit long for a digital story, but there's so much to this story - I'm already making about 5 on the grounds as it is!
August 26 at 9:46am · Like

Write a comment...

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