


Digital Stories of the Town Square: from workshop to practice

 fusion-journal.com/issue/004-fusion-the-town-and-the-city/digital-stories-of-the-town-square-from-workshop-to-practice/

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Abstract

Digital Stories of the Town Square: from workshop to practice examines digital storytelling production process and the possibilities and limitations of collaborative and co-creative approaches to digital storytelling. It addresses key themes in the literature of how to manage sources of expertise in collaborative production and investigates narrative forms that extend digital storytelling from stories of self-expression to stories that contribute to knowledge. Two digital stories were produced as the creative component of this research. The story *Chris Bacon- Bellringer* was produced in an adapted form of the traditional digital storytelling workshop and studied to examine the roles of storyteller and facilitator in facilitated media. The story *Four Stories of the Town Square* investigates a journalistic approach to digital storytelling while the production process documents the journey of a digital storyteller from workshop to working in the field.

Introduction

In the early 1990s and prior to the proliferation of the internet, Joe Lambert, Dana Atchley, and Nina Mullen developed a specific form of media practice at what is now the Centre for Digital Storytelling (www.storycentre.org). Lambert and his colleagues were influenced by the growing digital media movement to devise a community-arts based practice as a means for revitalising narrative and as an agent for social change (Lambert, 2009). This specific form of practice called digital storytelling is a workshop based format where 'everyday people' learn storytelling techniques and multimedia skills to create a first person video narrative usually three to five minutes of recorded audio and still images for online publication. Digital storytelling workshops are often project based and usually hosted by cultural institutions, educational organisations, or community groups (Mc William, 2009) and facilitated by experienced digital media producers.

For this research I drew upon the digital storytelling models of the Centre for Digital Storytelling in California, the *Capture Wales* project for the BBC, digital storytelling at the Queensland University of Technology and at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. I was also influenced by the *Hopevale Pelican Project* (Davey & Goudie, 2009) and *Sharing Stories: Problems and potentials of oral history and digital storytelling and the writer/producer's role in constructing a public place* (Klaebe, 2006). In each of these examples digital stories are produced in a workshop where the 'everyday person' storyteller is engaged as storyteller and creative producer. They are encouraged to 'shape' their own stories through story development, scriptwriting recording and editing. Storytellers are assisted by workshop facilitators.

This research used a digital storytelling approach to create two stories around the theme of the Bathurst Town Square. The first story is called *Chris Bacon – Bell Ringer* and is a 3-4 minute audio-visual story told in first person narrative. It was made using a co-creative (Spurgeon et al., 2009) approach to production with Chris as storyteller and myself as creative facilitator. The second story *Four Stories of the Town Square* is a 20 minute documentary style audio feature that situates myself as storyteller and creative facilitator. In this article I outline the theoretical approach and practicality of these two examples to extend a critique of digital storytelling; one that situates myself as a digital storyteller and documents how a storyteller/facilitator works in the field, turning theory into practice and in the course of such, contribute to the knowledge gap in the literature.

Current Practice/Knowledge

John Hartley (2008) suggests the tendency for digital stories to be told in first person narrative is a focus on self-expression as communication and limits digital storytelling as a format which can contribute to the development of knowledge. He proposes digital storytelling be scaled-up "to generate new 'objective' description, new argumentation...new forms of journalism and new works of the imagination" (p. 208). This scaled-up form of digital

storytelling is evident in Helen Klaebe's *Sharing Stories: A digital storytelling collection of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village* where a series of "historically significant" (Klaebe, 2006) digital stories were made around the memory of place and contributed to the public history of the Kelvin Grove urban development project.

Other examples of scaled-up digital storytelling includes the *Hopevale Project* where digital stories that contributed knowledge of caring for Country were recorded and archived for the ownership of the Hope Vale community in far north Queensland. Jo Tachhi's *Finding A Voice* project in South East Asia investigated how digital stories can facilitate positive social change in developing countries. While the focus of the *Victorian Bushfires* project at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image was to facilitate healing for the storytellers and engage the wider community in the events of the bushfire. For this research, I too wanted to scale-up digital storytelling and make stories that contribute to knowledge about the Bathurst Town Square. My research aligns with Klaebe's approach to theme stories around place and is motivated by Hartley's suggestion for digital storytelling to contribute to knowledge, "generate new forms of journalism and new works of the imagination".

The rise of internet video sharing sites in the mid-2000s and the emergence of platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo "have made it easy for almost anyone to share their experiences, likes, dislikes, opinions and creative work with the whole world" (Bhimani et al., 2013). These platforms encourage a shift in participation where traditional content consumers have become content producers. It can be argued digital storytelling can be found on blogs, Facebook, twitter, YouTube, Sound Cloud, Pin Interest and all the other online social media platforms. Christina Spurgeon and colleagues at the Queensland University of Technology frame digital storytelling as a "co-creative form of participatory media practice" (Spurgeon, et al., 2009). They introduce this notion to "differentiate" digital storytelling from other "spontaneous" forms of self-expression on social media and web based platforms and usefully employ this term to further describe digital storytelling as "a subset of planned, intentional participatory media engagements that rely upon professional facilitators to lead collaborative projects with explicit purposes and aims" (p. 276).

In recognising this facilitated nature of co-creative media, Christina Spurgeon points to the tension of balancing the "the interests and expectations of all involved" in digital storytelling (2009, p. 284). John Hartley (2008) discusses the problem of expertise in digital storytelling where the facilitator brings digital literacy and media production expertise to the process of making co-creative media and "everyday people" storytellers bring expertise regarding the story. Hartley suggests both sources of expertise are essential in creating a successful story.

Participants in the *Capture Wales* project were guided in the workshop by producers, writers and audio specialists from the BBC to help facilitate the production of broadcast quality digital stories. Helen Klaebe (2006) refers to making "selective and artistic choices" as writer/producer when working with "everyday people" to create digital stories for *Sharing Stories: A digital storytelling collection of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village*. Anna Poletti's analysis of digital storytelling suggests the workshop structure including the involvement of expert facilitators can create a "coaxed life narrative" in the stories (2011). My research investigates practical ways to manage sources of expertise in the co-creative process of digital storytelling.

Relationship to Current practice/knowledge

The digital storytelling workshop structure I learned at the Queensland University of Technology (<http://digitalstorytellig.ci.qut.edu.au>) is based on the model developed at the Centre for Digital Storytelling and includes:

- Story Circle – where each workshop participant practices telling a story to the group
- Script writing – each participant writes a draft script, revisions and final script
- Voiceover- each participant rehearses their script, records the script and edits the voiceover
- Images – each participant selects images for their digital story, edits images and makes a storyboard
- Soundtrack – each participant can choose a sound track or additional sound effects to enhance the digital story

- Permissions and credits – each participant assigns permissions and credits to their digital story
- Video Editing – each participant uses a movie-making computer software application to edit their digital story
- Output and dissemination – each participant can self-publish their digital story to a social media/video sharing web platform
- The screening – the workshop usually concludes with a screening of all digital stories produced during the workshop. In this way, the workshop finishes the same way it began with all participants telling a story.

Usually this model of workshop will run 9am-5pm for 3-5 days and involve a facilitator to teach and/or assist participants with technology. Workshop facilitators might also guide participants with voiceover recording, video editing and image selection. I'll now refer to two digital storytelling projects in particular that have adapted this workshop model and explain how my research aligns with these examples.

For *Sharing Stories: A digital storytelling collection of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village* Helen Klæbe adapted the workshop model in order to facilitate participation for storytellers who were not interested in learning the technology or attending workshops. The areas of the workshop she adapted include pairing storytellers to match technical experience with inexperience, engaging a team of producers to edit stories outside the workshop and visiting participants in their home to record stories. Klæbe also shifted from using scripted and recorded voiceover narrative in the stories to a semi-structured interview approach similar to recording oral history methods. The team of producers then edited the semi-structured interviews into stories with direction from the participants.

Jo Tachi adopted a journalistic approach to storytelling in the *Finding a Voice* project. This adaptation of digital storytelling – shifting from self-expression to journalistic form – meant the digital stories produced were documentary in style. Christina Spurgeon et al (2009) suggest this journalistic approach to storytelling (who, what, why, when and where) expands the narrative possibilities for digital stories. These stories were produced with a “professional, audience-focused style of communication” (p. 281). I suggest a journalistic approach to storytelling can also address Hartley's question of how digital storytelling can “scale-up content for audiences” and provide a form where everyday storytellers “can join the life of science, imagination and journalism, as well as that of self-expression and communication”(2008, p. 209).

My research is influenced by these examples of adapting digital storytelling and investigates the possibilities and limitations of this approach to tell stories that contribute knowledge of the Bathurst Town Square. I produced two examples of digital stories of the Town Square and these form the creative component of my research. The first story *Chris Bacon – Bell Ringer* was produced with Chris Bacon as the storyteller and me as creative facilitator. It is an adapted form of the digital storytelling model I learned at the Queensland University of Technology workshop and aligns with the approach by Helen Klæbe in *Sharing Stories: A digital storytelling collection of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village*. This story structure follows the first person narrative of scripted voice over with a photo slide show of between 3-5 minutes, while the workshop practically engages with the question of how to manage ‘expertise’ in a co-creative approach to digital storytelling.

The second story of this research *Four Stories of the Town Square* is an example of adapting a journalistic approach to narrative and presents as a documentary style digital story. In it, I am situated as storyteller and creative facilitator. While I still engage with the notion of ‘expertise’ in this story, as the storyteller I chose a more creative approach to tell a “professional, audience-focused style of communication” of the Town Square and one which contributes knowledge to the history of the Town Square.

My research also aligns with Klæbe's *Sharing Stories* by theming the stories around “place”. The Town Square or *Agora* is a “gathering place for the people” (Zucker, 1959), a place for civic engagement, the heart of the City. In this respect Paul Zucker suggests the *Agora* serves a “psychological function” and a place where public life is demonstrated. Early plans for Bathurst indicate the provision for a Town Square, however this space for “public life” was never realised in the ensuing development of the City. Only one third of the planned land for the Town Square remains public space today. While local historians can only speculate on why the planned Town Square was never realised, I wondered is a “public life” still evident in the streets of the Square? The digital stories I produced for this research were themed around this notion of the *Agora* as having a psychological function for public life.

Methods

Each digital story produced for the research represents a single case and is studied for its particularity. The *Chris Bacon – Bell Ringer* story is studied as an example of the adapted workshop model and examines the roles of storyteller and facilitator in this co-creative process. While the story *Four Stories of the Town Square* examines the form of digital storytelling and investigates new approaches for telling stories that contribute to knowledge. A case study approach enables me to describe the phenomenon of digital storytelling within the context of the production process I undertook.

A reflective journal was maintained to record the process of producing the two digital stories. Journal entries included information about meetings with research participants, interview transcripts, observation recordings and draft story notes. Data from the reflective journal was used to write a descriptive retelling of the production process. Data collected via a reflective journal can be prone to bias, hence my ongoing meetings with research participants enabled me to check and balance the data recorded in the journal entries.

In the early stages of the research I recorded semi-structured interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to generate conversation and remain open to capturing unexpected content. For example, the interview recording with Dr Robin McLachlan evolved into a walking tour of the Town Square. This approach to recording data was useful to prompt Dr McLachlan with stories of interest of the different locations and revealed information with meaning for me as researcher. This rich content became invaluable when devising the script for *Four Stories of the Town Square*. Estelle Barrett suggests the process of studio enquiry in creative arts research “often involves inventing new methods” (2007, p. 191). The use of portable recording devices allowed me to capture and record data, conversations and observations on location and adapt to changing data collection situations as in the example above.

Participant observation data collection methods were used extensively throughout this research. I audio recorded observations for more than 12 months to capture a sonic description of the experience of the Town Square. These observations included walking the streets of the Square, attending public events and my own personal and family experience in the Square. I also used participant observation where I walked the square, recording my observations of the experience in order to develop the story and devise the draft script for *Four Stories of the Town Square*. Data collected from participant observation can be heard in the two digital stories.

The Digital Stories

Background

In 2010 the New South Wales geographical names board recognised the Bathurst Town Square as a precinct. This was the outcome of the efforts of a small group of local history enthusiasts who had worked together as the Bathurst Town Square Committee. It is hoped the naming of the Bathurst Town Square will lead to historically sensitive future planning of the City.

Paul Zucker suggests “the history of the square actually means a history of space as the subject matter of artistic creation” (1959, p. 2). The members of the Bathurst Town Square Committee have actively promoted the historical significance of the Town Square through interpretive signage, a photographic exhibition, historical tours and the publication of a thematic history. Much of this “artistic creation” has detailed historical fact. I saw the opportunity to make digital stories that capture the history of the Bathurst Town Square intertwined with the contemporary experience of those who work, live and pass through its streets and laneways. These digital stories would be told to contribute knowledge in a digital media form to the growing body of work recognising the Bathurst Town Square.

Finding the stories

I introduced my research to members of the Bathurst Town Square Committee and they were encouraging of my proposal. I acknowledged the expertise of the members of this committee and encouraged their contribution to co-creatively realising the stories for this research. I met local historian and member of the Bathurst Town Square committee Dr McLachlan on location in the Town Square for a tour of the precinct. During this walking tour Dr McLachlan pointed out structures and monuments of interest and re-told historical stories. I audio recorded this walking tour and later listened back to identify stories of interest where public life is demonstrated in the Square.

Subsequent meetings with the Bathurst Town Square committee uncovered suggestions for contemporary storytelling of the Square and combined with the historical tales recorded in the walking tour gave me a valuable set

of ideas to develop the digital stories for this research. In the meantime I began observational research on location in the town square. I walked the Square and recorded sounds to gather a sonic reflection of the site. I recorded street sounds and events at different times of the day over a period of 12 months. I listened back to these sounds to identify what struck me as the contemporary experience of the Town Square and interpreted what I heard in the audio recordings in reflective journal entries

These recordings captured the public life of the Town Square and a contemporary experience to contrast against the historical data of the Square. The two digital stories I produced for this research evolved from the semi-structured interviews, attending Bathurst Town Square Committee meetings and sound recordings. The story of *Chris Bacon – Bellringer* tells a personal contemporary experience of the Anglican Church belltower which sits at the heart of the Square. It is a contemporary telling of the historical story of bellringing. *Four Stories of the Town Square* is a deliberate attempt to tell the historical stories of the Square within a contemporary framework. I will now describe the production process for each of these.

Story 1 – Chris Bacon – Bellringer

Context of Practice

The approach for this story is a departure from the traditional workshop format at the Centre for Digital Storytelling and what I had learned at the Queensland University of Technology. John Hartley (2008) talks about scaling-down the workshop component of digital storytelling to address the commitment (time and sometimes financial) required by participants. Klæbe structured *Sharing Stories* to “facilitate inclusiveness” (2006, p. 125) shifting the focus from the workshop to the story and the storyteller. Some of the stories created for *Sharing Stories* began as semi-structured interviews recorded with storytellers in the home. These were edited outside the workshop by a team of experienced digital media producers into digital stories.

I opted to scale-down the workshop for my research with all workshop activity being held on location in the belltower at a convenient time for Chris before bell ringing rehearsals. All sessions were recorded with a portable digital recorder.

Co-creative brainstorming

I chose not to employ the “story circle” techniques of the traditional digital storytelling workshop where participants engage in a series of storytelling games to “draw on their own and each other’s embedded knowledge of stories, narrative styles, jokes and references (J Hartley, 2008). I had worked previously with Chris on creative projects, we communicated warmly, I was familiar with his background in radio and knew he has a strong sense of narrative. In my adaptation of the “story circle” I engaged Chris as storyteller in a co-creative brainstorming session of how to tell the story for *Chris Bacon – Bellringer*. I asked a series of prompter questions to encourage conversation. We discussed the story theme, how to construct the story, devised a story structure and a production plan.

In the meantime, I attended bell ringing rehearsals as participant observer to audio record rehearsal sounds.

Story edit

For the first draft of Chris’ story we recorded a tour of the belltower where Chris takes a newcomer through the five levels of the bell tower discussing points of interest. I edited a documentary style draft from the recording and upon listening I didn’t hear the story of Chris Bacon the bellringer, but rather heard the story of the belltower. While I acknowledge these recordings are relevant and contribute knowledge to the story of the Bathurst Town Square, they don’t tell Chris’s story.

In order to find Chris’s story I revisited the audio recording from the “story circle”. I heard Chris talking about the ensemble of bellringers and the sense of achievement. I made the creative decision to edit another draft using segments of the recorded semi-structured interview with Chris and sound effects from the recording of the bell ringing rehearsal session. I also worked to the standard digital story length to 3-5minutes where my earlier audio draft was 15mins. This draft sounded more like Chris telling his story and matched Klæbe’s approach of recording semi-structured interviews to capture content and using a team of digital media specialists to edit and shape the story. Importantly Klæbe returned to the storyteller to seek approval for the final draft.

I met Chris in the belltower for him to hear this draft and asked whether he thought this captured his story. Chris commented the narrative repeats the same thing and doesn't progress the story. I agreed. Chris asked if we could start again and I agreed.

Chris and I again worked co-creatively to progress the story. Chris said he would like to draft a script now that he had a better idea of what was required. That Chris was not clear of the requirements of the story indicates a limitation in the research design. Even though I had described we were creating an audio/visual first person narrative story, I had not shown Chris any examples of digital stories during the "story circle". As this particular story was produced as a traditional digital story, it would have been appropriate to show examples to Chris during the "story circle". Chris wrote a script which we recorded in the bell tower.

Chris's script neatly told the story of *Chris Bacon – Bellringer*. I edited this recorded script with minimal creative input and added the photos Chris supplied for the final version of this story. (I used scanned copies of the photos Chris supplied and acknowledge digital photos might have given a better image resolution). Chris approved of this version of his story at the final viewing and invited me to contribute this story to the new Bathurst Bellringers website.

Story 2 – Four Stories of the Town Square

Context of Practice

The second story for this research was to be "my" story of the Town Square. That is, to adopt the traditional digital storytelling form – a short audio-visual story of first person narration – to capture four stories of the Town Square. In this context I would be situated as storyteller and creative producer. I revisited the earlier research data from interviews, meeting notes and observational recordings. The historical stories in the data struck me as interesting and enhanced my own experience of the Town Square. I don't live or work in the Town Square as Chris does (as a bellringer). My experience of the Town Square is as a casual participant/observer. I had to ask myself 'how I could approach telling "my" story of the town square using the traditional digital storytelling form?'

The digital storytelling structure I had learned at the Queensland University of Technology and which I adopted for Chris's story followed the model of 3-4 mins of audio visual material and first person narrative. I however, found these creative parameters restrictive in terms of how I wanted to tell the story of the Town Square. The questions arose: 'how could I extend digital storytelling as Hartley has suggested from the autobiographical first person narrative to telling stories that contribute to knowledge? How could I produce a story about the Town Square that was rich in content and informative for the listener?' In this respect I drew on my previous experience as a radio features producer and creatively leaned towards documentary as a production form.

In the process of collecting data for this research I had acquired knowledge about the history, stories and urban myths of the Town Square. This process of discovery was my experience of the Town Square. I used the data collected to write a story that captured "my" story of discovering the Town Square. It aligns with the traditional digital storytelling form in that it is first-person and autobiographical in nature, but draws on elements of documentary to develop the content beyond "self-expression" to a contribution to knowledge.

The Story Evolves

Using a participant observation approach, I walked the Square and recorded my observations and experience. I transcribed this data into a draft script. I revisited the data from interviews and from my own observational sound recordings. I selected clips from the interviews that would contribute knowledge to my story and sound bites that enhanced the experience of being on location in the Town Square. These were woven into the edit of my narrative. The historical stories resonated as important for telling a contemporary story of the Town Square.

While *Four Stories of the Town Square* deviates in form from the traditional structure of a digital story (and indeed evolved into a 20min radio feature), I argue the production approach for this story aligns with the co-creative approach to digital storytelling and is influenced by working towards "new forms of journalism and new works of the imagination" (J Hartley, 2008). During the data collection stage of the research for this story, I used the same creative brainstorming approach I had employed for Chris's story; working co-creatively with research participants to

identify four interesting stories to tell of the Town Square. I also argue the point-of-view for this story extends first-person narrative to tell an autobiographical story of discovery that contributes knowledge to the Town Square.

Discussion

I have used an adapted form of the traditional digital storytelling workshop for this research to examine co-creative approaches to production and storytelling. This research examined the roles of storyteller and facilitator in the process of creating two digital stories. Nancy Thumin's analysis of the *Capture Wales* project examines digital storytelling from the context of publication and audience reception. Thumin found the *Capture Wales* stories published on the BBC Wales website were "marked as material produced by non-professionals, thereby alerting the audience that they might be read differently" (2009, p. 206). This suggests the context in which stories are published may influence how they are read by the audience. John Hartley considers the tension of quality over process when he proposes a shift for digital storytelling to be used "to generate new 'objective' description, new argumentation... new forms of journalism and new works of the imagination" (2008, p. 208). While this research did not examine publication, audience or quality, these considerations were intrinsic to the creative decisions made during production. For example, during the creative brain-storming phase of *Chris Bacon – Bellringer* we acknowledged the story would need to appeal to "anyone" as the intended audience, and the most likely route for publication would be online. I was similarly motivated to tell a professional and audience-focused story in the development of *Four Stories of the Town Square* and expanded the creative parameters from a short form audio-visual first person narrative to a long-form documentary style story.

I scaled down the traditional workshop format taught at Centre for Digital Storytelling and the Queensland University of Technology and used the adapted workshop format introduced by Helen Klaebe for the *Sharing Stories* project. Chris and I worked co-creatively to brainstorm the story for *Chris Bacon – Bellringer* and adopted our roles of storyteller (Chris) and facilitator/editor (me) for the production process. The timeframe for making this story was lengthy as I returned frequently to meet with Chris to confirm creative decisions (as discussed above) and this might not be practical for participants of any future digital storytelling projects. This lengthy production timeframe could be addressed through better workshop design and an opportunity for further research would be to develop a workshop template of best practice to inform future co-creative storytelling projects.

A significant moment in the research occurred when Chris rejects my creative decisions and this outcome supports the literature. Daniel Meadows from *Capture Wales* says our stories are told after being edited by documentary makers and producers (2003). In her analysis of the workshop dynamic Anna Poletti suggests the digital storytelling workshop produces a "coaxed life narrative" (2011, p. 73), while John Hartley refers to the problem of "turning the 'authenticity' of others into the 'authorship' of the expert" (2008, p. 204). The creative decisions I made for shaping the *Chris Bacon: Bellringer* story did not accurately reflect how Chris wanted to tell his story. As a consequence of this outcome I reflected on my previous work producing radio features, where I had edited other people's stories and not returned to the storyteller for approval.

In 2011, I produced a digital story using the traditional format of short-form audio visual first person narrative at the Queensland University of Technology workshop. For this research I expanded these parameters in the production of *Four Stories of the Town Square* to create a professional and audience-focused story that contributed knowledge to the Town Square. I adopted Joe Tachhi's journalistic approach to storytelling in the *Finding a Voice* project and created a documentary style story for broadcast on radio or publication online. This creative decision to produce an audio documentary was influenced by my experience as a radio features producer. Further research could examine how this journalistic approach to storytelling could be implemented and facilitated in a community based digital storytelling workshop to make stories that contribute knowledge.

The participants for this research were selected based on their "expertise" of the subject of the Town Square. Chris Bacon was selected for his experience as a storyteller and his "expertise" regarding his story. As a result the initial research and production process was straightforward, and the stories reflect a substantial contribution to knowledge of the Town Square. Further research might examine a co-creative approach to making digital stories of the Town Square where participants/storytellers are self-selected. Any such future research would also produce a greater range of stories to capture the history and reflect the contemporary experience of the Town Square.

The production process for *Chris Bacon – Bellringer* illustrates the challenges of managing the roles of storyteller and facilitator in a co-creative approach to storytelling. This research found the storyteller brings "expertise"

regarding the story and the editor/facilitator brings “expertise” of digital technology, recording and editing. In this approach to digital storytelling the facilitator/editor should return to the storyteller to ensure, as Meadow’s suggests, the story is that of the storyteller and not the editor. In the process of making *Four Stories of the Town Square* I found the creative parameters of the traditional digital story can be expanded from self-expression to journalistic storytelling.

The scope of this research produced two stories about the Town Square and laid the foundations for a future digital storytelling project. The “expertise” of storyteller and facilitator/editor was examined in a practice-based environment and observations recorded for developing a best-practice workshop template.

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