Digital storytelling as an emerging documentary form

Ana Luisa Sanchez-Laws

Ph.d.
Department of Information Science and Media Studies
University of Bergen
Email: ana.laws@infomedia.uib.no

Abstract

This contribution presents the idea that digital storytelling can be fruitfully studied using concepts and perspectives from documentary theory. Two definitions of digital storytelling are analysed and compared to how documentary filmmaking has been characterized. From this comparison, it is possible to argue that digital storytelling works within a contextual contract similar to that of documentary filmmaking, especially in regard to the positioning of the audience and the media product. The study of digital storytelling might accordingly benefit from the ongoing discussions in documentary theory about authorial responsibility and claims of realism and truthfulness.

The question: can we look at Digital Storytelling through the lens of Documentary?

One can say that at the heart of digital storytelling lies a desire to get to the core of someone's life history, to reach a deep understanding of an individual through audiovisual means. Exactly the same can be said about the first person documentary. Can one claim, however, that digital storytelling presents a contextual contract between a media creator and his/her public that is markedly different from that of the autobiographical documentary, that it is a different genre? Or would it be useful to discuss digital storytelling as an emergent subgenre of documentary?

It is in what concerns the understanding of the products - the digital stories - where I feel more research should be conducted, and where I would like to propose a look into documentary theory. A discussion of the formal aspects of digital stories can help activate a much-needed debate about the kind of media literacy it might be useful to promote at digital storytelling workshops. In addition to enhancing processes of community building and personal exploration, the educational role of digital storytelling could also address some of the concerns of documentary theory. Topics such as our trust in the first person testimonial or the reflexive voice (especially in relation to its performative aspects), our belief in archival material as indexical of reality,

and a critical look at the use of the three act structure as the preferred basis for telling a story – all very deep concerns in documentary theory – could be discussed as part of digital storytelling workshops. I would argue that those debates need not only concern media students but should also be part of the workshops for "non-professionals" who are the main target of digital storytelling promoters. In turn, adding digital stories to the repertoire of products that can be scrutinized under the light of documentary theory could help shed new light on the discussions about truth claiming and the role of first person narratives in documentary.

My intention throughout this paper is to explore how documentary theory can be applied to digital storytelling so that we enrich both our understanding of digital stories and of how emerging digital forms impact documentary filmmaking. My interest in trying to make a bridge between documentary filmmaking and digital storytelling comes as a result of my experience as lecturer in the autumn of 2009 at the "Portrait and Documentary" course and the planning of the upcoming course in the autumn of 2010 entitled "Documentary and Reportage", both part of the Media Sciences Programme at the Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen.

There are several reasons why I think a discussion of digital storytelling could be useful in university level documentary courses. One is the possibility of using a digital storytelling workshop to prompt a discussion about ethical issues in documentary production. Having to go through the experience of creating a personal story can help raise awareness about the impact filmmaking can have on one's subject. At the same time, being confronted with the uncertainties of one's own story can bring clearer understanding of the challenges of claiming truthfulness for one's audiovisual documentation when relying on the testimonies of others. Emerging forms such as digital storytelling can be understood as part of a larger shift in media practice in general towards a reconsideration of the role of subjectivity. This is a topic that has been highly prevalent in the agenda of recent documentary theory (for example, Bruzzi 2006, Austin & de Jong 2008) and also in the literature about interactive documentary, digital media, and other emerging digital forms such as docu-games (for example, Walker 2005, Skartveit 2007). A second reason is how digital storytelling can help raise questions about the role of a media producer as a community facilitator. This aspect of media making is one that I have found easy to leave unexplored in courses at university, as so much emphasis is put on the final product.

Let me start, however, by briefly going through the definition of digital storytelling by some of its leading experts, then turn to some considerations from the point of view of documentary theory.

Defining digital storytelling

Digital storytelling has been presented as personal stories told and made public using digital media which fit into a short format (see Couldry 2008: 42, also Meadows n.p.). It has also been presented as a media practice that aims at creating opportunities to connect with others through conversational production (Lambert 2006a: 87).

More specific definitions of digital storytelling can involve two different components, one being the practitioner (the digital storyteller) and the second the product itself (the digital story), as is the case with the definition provided by the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California. In the CDS model, a digital story is "a short, first-person video-narrative created by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds", and a digital storyteller is "anyone who has a desire to document life

experience, ideas, or feelings through the use of story and digital media". The CDS definition further portrays the digital storyteller as an amateur who needs help from professionals in order to be able to tell the story: "usually someone who has little to no prior experience in the realm of video production but can spend a few days participating in a workshop, exploring and sharing a story with creative, and technical assistance from compassionate, and talented technically skilled CDS staff" (Center for Digital Storytelling, n.d.).

Other definitions of digital storytelling also portray the digital storyteller as an amateur, while at the same time stating the precise formal requirements that define a digital story. Such is the definition provided by Daniel Meadows at the BBC Digital Storytelling website: "Digital Stories are short, personal, multimedia scraps of TV that people can make for themselves ... This project requires commitment for, as well as all the technical stuff that must be learnt, script writing, picture editing and performance skills are also needed and these have to be worked on, which is why most Digital Stories are made by people attending workshops where participants can benefit from the help and advice of facilitators". About the formal aspects, Meadows states that "there's a strictness to the construction of a Digital Story: 250 words, a dozen or so pictures, and two minutes is the right length. As with poetry these constraints define the form ... and it's the observation of that form which gives the thing its elegance" (Meadows, 2008).

From these definitions, I would argue that digital storytelling puts less emphasis on the final product (since its formal aspects have been pre-established as reflexive voice over, archival photographic material and non-diegetic sound) than on the process of creating the digital story. This process has been qualified as, amongst other things, a process of community building and bridging across generations, a process of inner exploration or personal healing as in talk therapy, and even a means for political activism when used to connect personal stories with the broader public issues that a community faces (see Lambert, 2006b).

The (kind of) special attention to the contract between media maker and public in relation to truth or realism claims present in the final product that is so important in discussions about documentary filmmaking is not found in the two definitions of digital storytelling cited above. What are the reasons for not paying as much attention to the finished digital story as to the process of creating it?

Lambert has pointed out that "in the 20th century we got spoken to in the language of film... in the 21st century we get to talk back" (2006b). This position mirrors the way in which emerging practices (that are) attached to the use of digital technologies have often been discussed, in which the emphasis of the discussion is mostly on the practice and, in some cases, not enough on the products. New digital media practices are said to represent a break with the mass media system, a break that, in turn, has become synonymous with a break with a restrictive technological order, a move from passive audiences to active (or rather inter-active) publics and, as Manuel Castells points out, the inclusion of a multiplicity of messages and sources (Castells 1996: 339-40). Martin Lister and his colleagues also argue that new digital technologies have brought with them changes in relationships between subjects and media technologies (users as producers), new experiences of the relationship between embodiment, identity and community (changes in how we experience ourselves and the world), and new patterns of organization and production (Lister et al. 2003: 12). Nevertheless, should the way the amateurs talk back not be as thoroughly discussed as the way we have been talked to? Or should only the professionals be scrutinized for how they say things?

In this sense, I am missing a discussion about the products, the digital stories, and I think it is essential that this discussion be started if digital storytelling is

to make its way into the media studies curriculum at university level. The work of theoreticians and "professional" media makers should not be ignored in the literacy campaigns of digital storytelling promoters. There should be a concern with the digital storyteller's claims as present in the finished digital story, as is the case with documentary filmmakers. In fact, documentary practice is currently more and more willing to not only allow but (even) strongly encourage a critical view of their claims as the healthiest point of departure for their audience.

Let me now take a closer look at how these debates have unfolded in the literature about documentary filmmaking, especially in relation to the autobiographical or first person documentary.

The First Person Documentary

Michael Renov has worked with issues of documentary filmmaking (see Renov 1993) since the 1990s. Renov has also worked with issues of autobiographical documentary, or as he also calls it, the first-person film, since the early 2000s (for example, Renov 2004, Renov 2008). One of the arguments that Renov lays out in his most recent writing is that documentary studies have often been too entangled in trying to prove that it is possible to produce "verifiable knowledge" through facts and logical arguments, for which reason the autobiographical documentary or first-person film has not been an easy to accept form of nonfiction (Renov 2008: 40)[i].

Renov argues, however, that what is interesting about autobiographical documentaries is that even when composed of photographical images (often used as proof of truthfulness in documentary), the veracity of these films remains doubtful and, I would add, depends on our trust in the speaker. In this way, autobiographical documentary can but profoundly contest the larger truth claims of documentary. The first-person film calls attention to the uncertainties and equivocations that are present in the topic that we should know best: our own selves (see Renov 2008: 41). For Renov, the questions raised by the first-person film have become increasingly prominent in documentary theory. He argues that there is a growing focus on questions about the subjectivity / objectivity dichotomy in documentary, as "the subject *in* documentary has, to a surprising degree, become the subject *of* documentary" (Renov 2008: 49, 2004: xxiv).

Some of the problems that Renov points to might be better understood in light of the more general discussions about documentary filmmaking and what Skartveit refers to as "the documentary contract" (see Skartveit 2007: 38). For Skartveit, this is also a discussion that can be understood as one about genre. Skartveit argues that genre is essentially "a mutual agreement between the audience and the artwork" which, if not met, makes the audience feel cheated (Skartveit 2007: 39), and goes on to point out that, as a genre, documentary asks of the public to believe that what is presented is authentic and furthermore, it asks the audience to take actions in the real world (Skartveit 2007:41). Through this agreement, documentary turns spectators into witnesses, and as such, demands of them to be more than voyeurs pleasantly contemplating the horror of others. Documentary filmmaking demands a moral engagement with the events being depicted, for which reason it has often been used as a tool for political activism.

Some of the similarities that I want to point out between digital stories and documentaries can be explored now. First, both documentary filmmaking and digital storytelling share a concern to connect the personal with larger public issues, to be effective as tools for political and social activism (as argued by Lambert 2006b). Second, both digital stories and documentaries try to position the audience as witness, since what is claimed is that we are watching

a deeply personal (and truthful) testimony. Third, in the same way as digital storytelling is seen as a response to the restrictive order of the expository voice of big broadcasters, documentary has risen as a response to what was perceived as another restrictive order, "the sensationalized, oversimplified representation of reality offered by the average fiction film" (Nichols 1991: 47, quoted in Skartveit 2007: 47).

Renov's discussion about the poetics of documentary and its rhetorical and aesthetical functions can also help advance the argument that digital storytelling can be validly and fruitfully viewed from the perspective of documentary theory. He argues that the rhetorical and aesthetical functions of documentary practice fall within four fundamental tendencies, namely 1) to record, reveal or preserve, 2) to persuade or promote, 3) to analyse or interrogate and 4) to express (Renov 1993: 21-35). Let me now provide a closer look at these tendencies while also linking them to digital storytelling.

1. *To record, reveal or preserve:* For Renov, our will to document the historical world responds to our desire to "cheat death, stop time, restore loss" (Renov 1993: 25). This also includes an impulse to "rework" the past through audiovisual means, as avant garde artists have done with filmed diaries where they reflect upon their lives (Renov 1993: 25). This tendency is clearly found in digital storytelling: as I pointed out previously when discussing definitions, there is a desire to record and preserve, "a desire to *document* life experience, ideas, or feelings" (Center for Digital Storytelling, n.d. – my emphasis). Many of the digital stories on display at the Center for Digital Storytelling website, at the BBC Digital Stories website, or sites such as Museo da Pessoa, have to do with remembering someone that passed away (a grandparent, a friend) or events that the storytellers consider essential parts of their identity. Likewise, along with the wish to preserve the photographic record of a time past, many of these digital stories also reflect upon the events, perhaps trying to "rework" what happened, to reveal the inner truth of the images.

2. *To persuade or promote:* The persuasive tendency so common of the Griersonian style of documentary filmmaking of trying to educate the public is also present in digital storytelling, though in the form of testimonials. Instead of the proverbial voice of God, the voice of the self tells us how things really were, and this is even harder to contest[ii]. It is the indexing of digital storytelling as the honest and truthful account from the part of the digital storyteller that aids its persuasive intentions.

3. *To analyse or interrogate:* When Lambert points out that digital storytelling can be a way of working with intercultural differences in a learning situation (see Lambert 2006b), he is underlining how digital stories can be tools for interrogation and analysis. For Renov, the interrogation that takes place in documentary is between the filmmaker and the audience, and it is a process in which the filmmaker is looking for ways of empowering this audience through critical reflection (Renov 1993: 32). A digital story that provides us with a window into a personal reality that was until then unknown to us and that shakes our preconceptions about an individual and thereby a community, is a powerful means to prompt the kind of interrogation (that) Renov refers to.

4. *To express:* Perhaps the tendency (that is) most obviously encouraged in digital storytelling, the desire to express, has been one of the most repressed in some strands of documentary filmmaking. It brings us back to the discussion about objectivity / subjectivity and claims to truthfulness and realism. There is a question in documentary theory about the ethical problems of manipulating images to strengthen the argument made by the filmmaker. Bruzzi is amongst the theoreticians to point out that perhaps there is an inescapable performativity component in documentary

filmmaking, that there is always a negotiation between filmmaker and reality (Bruzzi 2006: 186). Bruzzi has also argued that in the last decades the repression of the author prevalent in documentary making is giving way to more expressive, reflective approaches (Bruzzi 2006: 198). The kind of reflexivity over the role of the author, and suspicions about the truth claims of the story presented, is in my view not yet part of the critique of digital storytelling, at least not as much as it is of documentary filmmaking.

Conclusion: Is it useful to look at digital storytelling as an emerging documentary form?

The above reflections are not exhaustive of the topics that can be deduced from documentary theory for discussions of digital storytelling. Finding the connections between previous and emergent media forms seems to me essential in order to dispel the false impression that new technologies represent a break with past media forms[iii]. Perhaps the current discussions about performativity in documentary filmmaking could help rethink Daniel Meadows' scripted dialogues with his webcam and critically view the way they are offered as truthful testimonies of personal events. Perhaps a critique of the public trust in the photographic archive could be an enriching addition to the digital storytelling media literacy agenda. Finally, perhaps it would be useful to criticize and reconsider the use of non-diegetic sound in digital storytelling to emphasize emotion and present the inner world of the storyteller, and to problematize its use as a persuasive device that seeks primarily to elicit an emotional response.

I hope the parallels I have attempted to draw can support the argument that digital storytelling and autobiographical documentary work within similar contextual contracts and that it could be useful to explore digital storytelling through the application of documentary theory – even to think of if as an emerging documentary form. For its concern with factual information and its desire to produce change in the world through the representation of real life, I am inclined to consider digital storytelling as very closely related to documentary, and would argue that it is an emerging documentary form. A look at the issues that have been raised about documentary and the way they might be present in digital storytelling seems to me essential as we witness big broadcasters such as BBC harvest users' thirst for content production (in this way managing to maintain their gate keeping role) and as we see corporations relabeling the tried and true testimonial advertisement as a digital story. These and other issues that have been central in discussions of documentary production and ethics can be, I argue, fruitful additions to our understanding of digital storytelling.

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[i] Nonfiction is here used as "texts where the audience is asked to believe that the events portrayed took place in the actual world" (Skartveit 2007: 31).

[ii] In fact, a discussion of Nichols' documentary modes and the way these have helped cement the idea that the expository mode is always authoritarian while the reflexive mode is "truer" could be a rich addition to the discussions of digital storytelling workshops (see Nichols 1994: 95, Nichols 2001 and the critique by Bruzzi [2000] 2006).

[iii] For a broader discussion of this topic, see Lister et al. 2003.