Third Edition

Digital
Storytelling

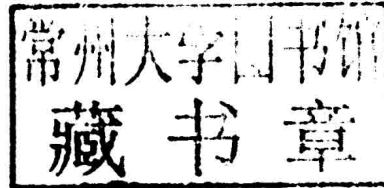A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment

Carolyn Handler Miller

Digital Storytelling

A creator's guide
to interactive entertainment

Third Edition

Carolyn Handler Miller

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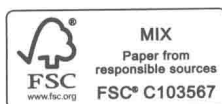
Digital Storytelling

Bound to Create

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Bound to create.

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*This edition of <u>Digital Storytelling</u> is
dedicated to my husband, for his unwavering and
cheerful support …*

*And in memory of my mother, who always enjoyed a
good story, no matter how told.*

Foreword

Digital storytelling. In its true essence, it is so much more than simply "writing for the Web." The secret to any degree of long-term "success" lies with storytelling and attracting and then engaging a captive audience in a digital space where banner ads, clicks, pokes, cat videos, and a host of other distractions are rife is no mean feat.

Crafted in a way that only a great storyteller might, *Digital Storytelling* is delivered in a cohesive arc of five parts as Carolyn Handler Miller takes you by the hand and walks and talks you through new technologies and the creative opportunities that they bring for writers and creators, pausing to consider convergence, interactivity (and most importantly its effects), and digital storytelling tools. Vital topics are finely balanced, not focusing too intently on the digital and choosing instead to bring core fundamentals of storytelling to your toolbox. Characters, dialogue and emotion, story structure, and a laser focus on your audience and their behaviors are woven throughout this third edition of *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*. Carolyn expertly takes a close look at dovetailing digital techniques with storytelling principles and how they apply to video games, online, mobile and apps, ARG, TV, toys, and immersive environments, concluding with the much puzzled upon question of career considerations and finding *paid* work as a digital storyteller.

Which is perhaps where I come in …

In 2006 I was a bestselling novelist, having penned three "rom coms," and had begun to flex my playwriting muscles too. My first three novels were written with a "promise" that I'd made to myself. In an era where Bridget Jones was klutzing through life, documenting her calorie and nicotine intake and where romantic comedy and chick lit were being constantly dumbed down, I made a deal with myself.

Each of my books would organically weave three things:

1. a foreign destination;

2. an art form; and

3. a genre of music.

And so *Class Act*, *Look Before You Leap*, and *Three of a Kind* were set in dual locations and took readers from Paris to Valencia, Dublin to Lisbon, set against a backdrop of classical, jazz, and blues with a splash of additional color courtesy of Edgar Degas and his ballerinas. I was frustrated as I yearned for these stories to live and breathe beyond their book jackets. I imagined readers *listening* to *Canon in D* whilst reading the slower paced scenes. I wanted

a postcard print of Degas ballerinas, with their pastel blue tutus, inside my front cover. But this was 2004 and the only way this would happen would be with a clunky CD in a sleeve inside the back cover. A "multimedia" add-on.

Disillusioned with the confines of restricting my characters and their stories within the jacket of a book I also realized that I was one in a stable of similar writers. Our books were simultaneously hitting the shelves, I had a series of uncomfortable photo shoots in shop windows (once holding a book in one hand and a yogurt in the other—don't ask), and was gracing the sofas of breakfast and afternoon shows for interviews, not so much about the books, but more about the female-centric (and sometimes comedic) themes within them.

My publisher wanted me to keep doing the same thing.

I didn't.

I focused on playwriting and showcasing my plays was my first experience of audience reactions to my storytelling, in real time. It was pivotal, shocking, and hugely exciting. That dialogue and those scenes I'd expected them to bust their sides laughing at? They merely tittered … The poignant relationship-split scene that I'd cried over as I wrote? They barely sniffed. And a couple of people blew their nose, loudly. But nobody bawled. At least not like I did. I had a lot to learn—about writing for performance and connecting with my audience. Disillusioned with the limited scope for my writing, the range for reaching out to, interacting with, and engaging an audience was stifling and so I turned to the Internet, specifically to Google …

Ironically, although probably not surprisingly, I first met Carolyn digitally, six months later. The disillusionment had led me to enroll as a full-time student on a Master's Program teaching Creative Writing & New Media. As a guest lecturer, Carolyn immediately captivated us with her knowledge, processes, awareness of fluidity and yet focus when writing to entertain an audience that were so blinkered to "traditional" or "old" media. Within an hour of "meeting" and asking her a barrage of questions I'd clicked to buy the first edition of *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*.

And yet it was only the beginning. At the very least, of a friendship between Carolyn and I.

A further year later, under the direction of my mentor Christy Dena, Ph.D. and with a (now embarrassing) amount of emails to both Christy and Carolyn, my fourth novel had fragmented and was living and breathing online through a series of blogs, YouTube videos, *Second Life* meet-ups, email interactions, fictitious magazine articles, spoof magazine covers, postcards sent to readers around the world, and forums. Within days agents, newspapers, magazines, production companies, and networks were pinging my inbox and calling my phone. It was clear I was on to something. Tim O'Reilly's "Tools of Change in Publishing Conference" whisked me to New York to present my project and publishers, broadcasters, and filmmakers around the world invited me to talk to their storytellers.

It was the ultimate baptism of fire and whilst it sometimes burned, I mostly glowed with excitement and opportunity.

Digital storytelling has been the cause of excitement, debate, and discussion for a while, bandied around under broader terminology such as pervasive storytelling, transmedia storytelling,

and storytelling 2.0, brings forth animated discussions of narrative design, experience design, engagement, and interaction, and is the topic of conversation for many conferences that focus on entertainment and all things "new."

I now work with storytellers and producers across a global entertainment industry, with a close-knit community of great people with awesome job titles, and on my travels, my time as Producer and Chair of StoryWorld Conference, teaching at film and media schools, and conversations with renowned Hollywood storytellers and consultants, there remains one statement that rings loud and clear: "there just aren't enough writers who know how to *really* do this."

There are plenty of strategists, architects, and theorists—but never enough writers who *really* understand the complexities of digital storytelling—the interactions, pacing, calls to action, storylines. Somewhere amongst the bells and whistles, human behaviors tend to be forgotten and many are the novice storytellers who believed they can *make* their audiences behave differently.

If this book serves only to make you do one thing—let it be to write.

To experiment, to understand your audience, to prototype, to strategize, but to write and "get it out there."

In balance to there being "not enough writers who know how to *really* do this" there is also a huge opportunity for experimentation—which brings experience, failure, and then growth.

If there's one thing I learned from my Master's story project, it's that I learned more from what went wrong than what went right. That's where the learning is—in the experimentation. Storytelling is intrinsic to our DNA and at many a conference I've heard an "expert" preach about the days of cave painting and campfire oratory tales. We know this. What we're still trying to catch up with is how to turn our storytelling ship and navigate digital whilst keeping tight with our audience, weaving entry points, jump-off points, and opportunities for interactivity—all whilst retaining exemplary fundamentals of storytelling.

I am absolutely honored and delighted to be writing this foreword for Carolyn's third edition of *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*.

So, at the risk of repeating myself …

Digital storytelling. In its true essence, it is so much more than simply "writing for the Web." The secret to any degree of long-term "success" lies with storytelling and attracting and then engaging a captive audience in a digital space where banner ads, clicks, pokes, cat videos, and a host of other distractions are rife is no mean feat.

Because without "story" it's all just noise and here's where Carolyn truly excels.

Alison Norrington
CEO
storycentral

Preface

THE EVOLVING WORLD OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Since the second edition of this book came out, back in 2008, a staggering number of new developments and innovations have taken place in this field. I cannot think of one area of digital media where tremendous change has not occurred. Furthermore, whole new areas of content have been created where virtually nothing existed in 2008. These include storytelling on smart phones and tablets; new forms of interactive TV, like second-screen and social TV; the huge wave of popularity of social media, which is turning into a viable platform to tell stories; and the growth of transmedia storytelling. New digital platforms and technologies have also been introduced, such as Google Glass and the Kinect. In this new edition, I have done my best to include all major new developments in this arena as clearly and completely as possible.

As in the two earlier editions, the focus here is on storytelling, not on the technology. I have discussed the technology only to the degree that such a discussion can be used to clarify how a particular technology can be used for storytelling purposes. I leave it to others to delve deeply into the technological aspects of this field. While I fully acknowledge that the technology is extremely important, it is not only beyond the scope of this book, but it is also, to be honest, beyond my expertise. I have instead focused on the areas where I do have a certain expertise, which is in storytelling and in creating interactive digital media projects. Thus, I have covered storytelling essentials: character development, plot, emotion, and structure. And I have also focused on the impact of interactivity on narrative, and the way it can change everything about classic storytelling.

One interesting observation I made in preparing this new edition is the fact that many recent projects defy neat categorization. For example, a single project may be a work of transmedia storytelling, and simultaneously be a work of social media, an interactive experience for the Web, and a new form of gaming. It is becoming increasingly challenging to slot projects into specific chapters. Perhaps we are looking towards a world where all forms of digital media will be multi-platform. If multi-platform stories become the norm, labeling them by the platform they live on will no longer make sense. The one thing we can count on is that significant changes will continue to take place in this field. While some may be predictable, many will not be.

THE VARIOUS DEFINITIONS OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

It should be noted that people use a variety of definitions for "digital storytelling." The way we use it in this book is this: digital storytelling is the use of digital media platforms and interactivity for narrative purposes, either for fictional or for non-fiction stories. Under this definition, we include everything from video games to smart toys to virtual reality, and a number of other story forms as well.

Quite often the projects highlighted in his book have been produced by a professional team, and with the expectation that the work would be seen by a large audience and in the hopes that there would be some financial compensation for producing it. While a great many of these works are made for entertainment purposes, others are made to train, to promote, to educate, and to inform. But even when employed for pragmatic purposes, these works always contain elements of storytelling.

In the educational arena, however, "digital storytelling" is used to mean the employment of still images and a recorded script, and possibly some video or animation, to tell personal stories or stories relating to an element in the curriculum. Often children are given the opportunity to create these stories to teach them narrative skills and to excite them about learning. In the anthropological field, "digital storytelling" is used as a way to preserve stories of a culture or historic period that might otherwise be forgotten.

In journalism, the term is used to indicate a true story that is told via multiple media, such as audio, text, video, and still images. In the last several years, we have seen a significant growth in interactive documentaries, and some of these have been made for prestigious institutions like the *New York Times* and the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

Although these definitions and intentions differ, they all do have some critical elements in common: they are narratives, they employ digital media, and they are meant to be engaging.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS EDITION

This edition is organized much like the second edition, although some new chapters have been added, and several chapters have been merged. Nevertheless, the five large divisions used in the second edition have been retained here. They include:

- PART 1: NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

  This section covers the history and development of digital storytelling, and also examines what is meant by convergence and how it relates to digital storytelling.

- PART 2: CREATING STORY-RICH PROJECTS

  This section examines the fundamentals of storytelling (such as plots, character development, emotional content, and structure) and how they are impacted by interactivity. It also investigates important developmental considerations like one's

audience; the use of social media and transmedia; and the steps that one can take to make the production process as smooth as possible.

- PART 3: HARNESSING DIGITAL STORYTELLING FOR PRAGMATIC GOALS

This section discusses how digital storytelling can be used in education and training, in promotion, and for informational purposes.

- PART 4: MEDIA AND MODELS: UNDER THE HOOD

The chapters in this section delve into specific forms of digital storytelling, including video games, immersive environments, projects for the Web, smart toys, and many other areas. These chapters offer a cross-section of examples and case studies of successful projects in each area. Several projects that did not flourish are also examined, along with the reasons for their lack of success. This is done in the belief that one can learn as much from failures as from successes.

- PART 5: CAREER CONSIDERATIONS

This section is devoted to questions that must be answered if one wishes to work in the digital storytelling field or wishes to sustain a successful career in this arena. Should one create a showcase? What are the different ways of working in this field and what are the advantages and disadvantages of each? What legal matters should you be aware of?

Each chapter in this book opens with a series of thought-provoking questions relating to the contents of the chapter. Most chapters close with several "idea-generating exercises." These exercises give you, the reader, the opportunity to try out the concepts discussed in the chapter and to stretch your imagination. The chapters in Part 5 contain practical suggestions and tips instead of exercises, a better fit for this section.

SOURCES AND PERSPECTIVE

The material in this edition, as with the first two editions of the book, is based in part on interviews conducted with practitioners and experts in the field of digital storytelling. Twenty-two new interviews were done for this edition. The book also retains many of the highlights of interviews done for the older editions, so, in a sense, it is a compendium of wisdom from the field. Much of the information offered in this edition is supported by facts or opinions found in blogs, magazines, surveys, and publications dedicated to various aspects of digital media. The sources of this information are given in the text, after the relevant content, rather than in footnotes, which many readers find distracting.

In addition to information from experts and from printed sources, some of the content here is based on my own professional experience in the field. My personal perspective is that of a writer and a storyteller, a person on the creative side of this field, and that perspective also forms the thrust of this book. In addition, much of the content is based on many hours of playing games and exploring various works of digital storytelling, which is the great pleasure of writing a book like this.

The majority of information contained in this edition relates to projects or developments that had not yet seen the light of day when the second edition was published. In addition, some solid examples of digital storytelling from the first two editions have been retained, because these projects broke new ground and are still highly useful as models.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The field of digital storytelling moves so quickly that it is inevitable that even a brand new edition of this subject will not be able to contain everything that is new and worth noting. Whenever possible, I have offered up specific sources of information that will enable the reader to stay current, including online publications and the websites of important trade groups and organizations. I have worked hard to bring this edition up-to-date and even project into the future, but ultimately you, the reader, must take on the responsibility to carry on where I have had to leave off, and make your own discoveries.

When possible, I will post new information on the book's companion website and on my own website, www.CarolynMiller.com. I also welcome your questions and comments. These may be sent to me at Carolyn@CarolynMiller.com. The companion website can be found at www.focalpress.com/cw/miller.

Acknowledgments

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