

## Voices for a New Vernacular: A Forum on Digital Storytelling

### Interview with Henry Jenkins

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#### ***What makes digital storytelling different than other received forms of storytelling?***

Trick question. Because it is “digital.”

Seriously, though, there would have been a time when the word *digital* might have limited us to particular kinds of storytelling and entertainment experiences that were well aligned with the affordances of the computer. There was a whole generation of writers performing what I would call *speculative aesthetics*—trying to identify the medium specificity of the digital and then using it to predict what new kinds of storytelling practices might emerge. But digital can now encompass a broad range of different storytelling practices, including both those that are well established through nondigital platforms and those that have been “born digital.”

Digital storytelling could include stories generated via digital tools, stories that involve various forms of networked participation or interactivity, stories that are distributed via digital platforms, or stories that are consumed on digital platforms. Digital storytelling could include pretty much every television show, film, or audio recording, but it could also include media that will be experienced nowhere else other than through networked computers. My assumption is that every sound, image, and story produced today will travel across every available media platform, because publics want the media they want, when and where they want it, and they will take it illegally if it is not available legally. So, I suspect, if it has not happened yet, *digital storytelling* is a term that will outlive its usefulness.

***Admittedly, digital is a loose term that comes with some restrictive assumptions. With that being said, what encompasses the digital for you, and what particular affordances does it offer?***

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All my throat clearing aside, we might imagine three different models of how stories might operate within a digital environment. The first would be what we might call *multimedia stories*. Here, we bring together within the same platform a bundle of related content that might tap into the capacities of text, video, audio, interactive media, or still images to produce an integrated experience of some kind.

The second is what I would call *transmedia* (Jenkins, 2006, 2010). Here, storytellers use digital platforms alongside a range of other delivery channels so that each piece of media adds something significant to the overall experience of the story world and so that the reader has to actively track down and reassemble that dispersed content.

The third is what I would call *cross-media content*: These are stories produced for other media that can be accessed or downloaded from a digital platform. Of these three models, the first and second—but not, in most cases, the third—would constitute what I am describing as digital storytelling.

As we move beyond the distinction between multimedia, transmedia, and cross-media, we might add some other features of the digital environment that have to do with the viewer's role in creating the entertainment experience. First, we might talk about interactivity as choices preprogrammed into the platform, as in, for example, the design of digital games. Second, we might talk about participation as more open-ended options that require active creative decisions on the part of participants who take some individual or collective ownership over the kinds of content posted or circulated. So we might include here various forms of crowd-sourced media (such as that produced by HitRecord) or crowd-funded media (such as that which gains the support of Kickstarter); it might include media produced by amateur or semiprofessional video producers (such as that which most often gets posted on YouTube or Vimeo); it might include content that gets circulated via social media (Facebook or Twitter). And it might include content that is remixed using digital tools.

Once we have access to these sets of categories (multimedia, transmedia, cross-media; interactive, participatory), we can describe and classify many different kinds of storytelling practices in the digital age.

### ***Why do certain forms of storytelling seem to persist regardless of platform?***

Storytelling practices persist because they are meaningful to those who produce and consume them, because they satisfy our sense of what it means to be a human living in a particular cultural context. We want to hear stories by gifted storytellers who apply their skills to create distinctive experiences. We also want to use stories in a more social context, as resources for social exchange with people who matter to us. We will tolerate these stories because they are pertinent whether or not they are told well. We should not confuse these two kinds of storytelling experiences: Both have persisted across human history, and the emergence of better platforms to, say, share stories among friends and family members does not threaten necessarily the persistence of more professionalized kinds of storytelling. So we may think about storytelling in terms of its cultural/social functions.

We should also recognize that, as we enter into new and unfamiliar spaces and use tools less familiar to authors and readers, we tend to rely more heavily on stories that follow familiar, predictable genre

conventions. If we are putting together a puzzle, we need to have at least a broad mental picture of the outlines of the object we are trying to re-create, and so the first content that gets circulated through a new media platform tends to be content that already has a deep history in the culture.

We also should not be surprised to see new tools get deployed to recirculate Shakespeare or the Bible, for instance, because the content, in this case, helps to shape public perception of the value of the platform. Only later, as we develop a more sophisticated understanding of what these media can do, do we develop a grasp of medium-specific features that can be deployed to tell stories in ways that fully tap the affordances of that platform. And one could argue that the more innovative a production is at utilizing the affordances of the medium, the more conservative it needs to be on the level of content in order to help the public make that transition.

***What is the most exciting prospect of digital communication for you? Why? How do you see it changing in coming years?***

For me, the most important and exciting consequence of new media has been to help expand who has access to the means of cultural production and circulation (Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016).<sup>1</sup> This is at the heart of what I tend to describe as participatory culture. If we look at filmmaking, for example, we can see that there have been amateur filmmakers as long as there has been cinema, but there have been very few outlets where such filmmakers could show their work, and thus these films have had very limited impact on our understanding of what constitutes cinema. They were most often home movies, which really meant films that not only captured aspects of our domestic life, but were trapped inside the home, and thus of interest only to our immediate friends and family.

The digital has lowered the cost of production and thus expanded who could make movies; the digital has also opened up new channels of distribution and circulation, creating a space where amateur media content can be engaged with via a larger public and can have some influence on the core conversations of our culture. As this happens, more artists will find their way into the mainstream media, and they are going to be telling different kinds of stories than mainstream media has told before. And with the chance to speak to a larger public, we are seeing these artists become more ambitious in the techniques they use, the genres they embrace, and the themes they examine.

That said, we should be clear that not everyone has access to the means of production and circulation. This is a *more* participatory culture—not a *fully* participatory culture—and so there are many struggles yet to be fought, for example, over who has access to the media literacies needed to fully participate, over what policies control ownership and flow of content, and especially over the relations between amateur and commercial production. We are deep enough into the age of networked storytelling that we can see the friction points that disrupt and challenge our more utopian dreams for participatory culture. For the

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<sup>1</sup> Read more on a different picture of contemporary American youth in Jenkins et al.'s new book by Jenkins et al.'s recent new book, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*, (2016), New York University Press.

past decade or more, we have been caught in ongoing struggles over the terms of our participation. What we are going to do about them is of increased urgency.

***What does a focus on the digital tend to obscure? How can students, practitioners, and scholars alike give the proper kind of attention to these issues?***

Tara McPherson (2014) has made the point that as media studies turned to theorize the digital, it took a major step back from a focus on questions of gender, class, race, and ethnicity—though not so much from issues of generational differences. A focus on the digital brought with it a new kind of formalism—we were more interested in how stories were being created and delivered than we were in who was telling the stories to whom and what stories were being told for what purposes. The plentitude of YouTube, which has such a vast array of nonprofessionally produced content, masked questions of who was being excluded or marginalized and through what means. Today, we can no longer afford to bracket these questions.

As gaps in access to technology have closed, at least within the United States, we are seeing more clearly gaps in who gets to participate and through which channels. We are seeing spectacular examples of minority-produced content reaching wider audiences and having deeper impact than ever before, but this often only reveals gaps in the means of representation and also shows us the ways certain ideas do not necessarily circulate outside of the communities that created them. So any focus on digital storytelling today should be focused very much on overcoming the participation gap and more generally engaging with the politics of representational exclusion and marginalization.

***One of the operative terms in your recent work is spreadable. What are some significant ways in which stories spread, and is there any predictability to what spreads and what doesn't?***

The concept of spreadable media starts from the assumption that stories and other media spread because they constitute a form of social currency within a networked culture (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). We share stories with each other to facilitate and sustain conversations on topics that are meaningful to our social network. These stories may be those we generate ourselves to account for our own personal experiences, but just as often, they come ready-made, material we appropriate from the culture around us and recontextualize for our current conversational needs. So we may pass along a sketch from a late-night comedy show, an interview with a celebrity, a news clip, an advertisement, or a music video—each of which we have reframed with our message as we post it on our social media outlets. We are hoping that we get the chance to share the story with friends who might not have seen it otherwise, and thus, minimally, we are sharing an emotional experience and, in many cases, a conversation starter.

Such exchanges have long been part of our social interactions with each other (Jenkins, 1992). Think about so-called water cooler conversations around favorite television shows. Before that, we know that certain news stories were widely cut out of the paper and put into scrapbooks, that certain stories got mailed to relatives in other cities, and that some stories traveled from newspaper to newspaper across the country, because they were significant enough that people wanted to both hold on to them and pass them along.

But such practices take on new significance in a world where the public has much greater capacity to informally archive and recirculate the media content they find meaningful in the course of their everyday lives. The cumulative effect of those choices about which content to circulate can dramatically shape the visibility of certain pieces of media. A video from a nonprofit group focused on child soldiers in Uganda (i.e., *Kony 2012*) might be seen by more eyes in the course of a week than those that saw the highest rated show in American television. A series of memes may call attention to a phrase uttered in a political debate (i.e., Mitt Romney's "binders full of women" comment from the 2012 U.S. presidential debates) and have an impact on the election outcome. People have developed more nuanced taxonomies about what kinds of media content are most apt to spread, but it boils down to the idea that we share media in ways that are meaningful in our ongoing conversations with others.

***How does the concept of transmedia relate to your understanding of narrative? Are all transmedia texts necessarily the product of storytelling, or is there a specific distinction to be made between the two?***

The word *transmedia* is an adjective (Jenkins, 2010). It describes any structured set of relationships across media platforms. The word needs to modify something. So we can certainly point to transmedia narratives—stories that get dispersed across multiple media platforms—and we can see the dispersion and reassembly of those story elements as part of the storytelling process.

But transmedia may be as closely related to the concept of world-building as it is to storytelling. A world is a narrative system that involves the relationship between many different parts. A rich world can thus support many different stories, and our mental grasp of the properties of a world can help us make sense of the relationship between stories that we encounter in a range of different mediated spaces. Each of these story fragments might well be simple and formulaic, told in a very classical manner, but there are insights we will gain by reading the pieces in relation to one another.

Part of the art of transmedia storytelling, then, involves the meaningful chunking of bits of narrative information to ensure that each segment is meaningful on its own terms but also involves the development of a blueprint for how the parts fit together so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Some of the key questions around the craft of storytelling here include: How do storytellers motivate readers to seek out additional story elements on those other platforms? How much orientation and navigation do readers need to meaningfully identify and fit together those story elements to form a richer pattern? And how do we shape the emotional responses of spectators who may have delayed gratification when they do not fully grasp the significance of a story element until they can juxtapose it with elements found elsewhere in the mediascape? Just as they were important in, say, classical Hollywood cinema or broadcast television, genres play crucial roles here in terms of allowing us to recognize and find rewards in these larger patterns and in motivating us to seek out further content in order to complete the cycle of stories that constitutes the transmedia system.

***What do you make of the contentious space between professional and individual narrative as it stands today? Do media institutions do a better job dealing with unauthorized appropriations of their work than they did during the early days of digital communication?***

We've certainly seen a great deal of progress in terms of how commercial media-makers and storytellers understand grassroots appropriation and remixing of their content. The reality is that readers have always formed their own interpretations, engaged in speculations that took them beyond the borders of the story, reimagined key scenes to make them more meaningful and emotionally rewarding to them, and otherwise tampered with the content as handed down from on high by the Author. Digital culture has made this process more visible: New tools make it easier to grab hold of and remix media content; new circuits make it easier to share such content and have made that content more visible beyond our immediate circle of friends and family; and new industry structures have opened up more options between the totally amateur and the totally professional, with various flavors of semiprofessional and semicommercial content production gaining greater visibility than ever before (Jenkins, 2006).

The media industries responded to these potentially disruptive changes by trying to shut down all of that unauthorized and often unwanted content by any legal means at their disposal, but the sheer scale of this activity has made this whack-a-mole strategy a nonstarter. And just as importantly, the media industries have developed a greater recognition of the value of audience engagement, especially in a context where there is a glut of content on the market. Grassroots creativity can sustain audience interest and expand the shelf life of content that audiences find meaningful (Jenkins et al., 2013). And we've seen some kinds of appropriated and remixed content in music, in games, and now in fiction become a source of revenue generation and value production in its own right, so now there's a growing interest in monitoring the spaces of grassroots media production to maximize return on what the audience generates.

As this happens, we are more apt to see companies try to exert legal claims over what grassroots artists and authors are doing with their material rather than seeking to shut them down. This is opening up a whole new set of challenges for groups like the Organization for Transformative Works, which is seeking to advocate on behalf of the rights of grassroots storytellers and media-makers. Today, OTW has noted that it is facing much greater challenges around the commercial exploitation of amateur media content than around takedown notices and other attempts to exert copyright control over materials.

***How should we best understand the concept of convergence today?***

Frankly, the word *convergence* is not one that I use as much anymore, not because the word no longer describes the reality of how media operates, but because—in many ways—media studies has already absorbed the lessons I wanted the concept of convergence culture to communicate (Jenkins, 2006). First and foremost, I wanted to nudge academic media studies out of thinking in terms of one media platform at a time and toward thinking of the interrelationship between different kinds of media platforms and practices. So the idea of transmedia storytelling requires us to think about the ways content produced, delivered, and consumed via different media silos might nevertheless be working together to achieve an accumulative impact (Jenkins, 2010).

We are making the same discoveries now in terms of how we think about the political use of media (Jenkins et al., 2016). There's still some tendency to focus on new and emerging platforms—Twitter, Facebook, YouTube—as if the technology determined how activists deploy these platforms. We talk about

Twitter revolutions or hashtag advocacy, but, in fact, my own current work stresses that activists today are pursuing social justice by any media necessary, organizing campaigns that encourage active participation across a dispersed network of followers, each of whom uses the skills and access they have to pass their message along to those groups they have access to. In this means, core insights— Occupy’s distinction between the 99% and the 1% or the critique of racialized police violence and the insistence that Black Lives Matter—get spread across social networks, across different delivery channels, and across different platforms at an extraordinary scope and speed. And the power comes when we encounter these messages again and again through so many different channels. This is what happens as a generation that grew up playing within a more participatory culture direct media making and circulation skills they have acquired to the concerns of political change and social justice rather than engagement with popular culture as a means of entertainment (e.g., Jenkins & Kelley, 2013).

***What do you think are the most important things for individuals to understand about producing content in the current media landscape? What are the most important things for media institutions to recognize?***

For individuals, I think the biggest challenge has been to recognize the scope and scale of the new communicative capacities that have opened up for us over the past few decades. Such capacities have enormous potential as we learn to apply our shared capacities toward collective action and as more people develop a sense of their own voice, but they also come with enormous risks, which we still imperfectly understand. So there are risks involved with how we trust the information that is being shared with us through nontraditional channels, how professional journalists hold grassroots media accountable for its distortions, and vice versa. There are privacy risks involved when we make false assumptions about what audiences we are speaking with. Content leaves safe spaces and moves into more combative ones as a consequence of the porousness of the new media environment. There are risks involved in our contact with corporate interests that promise us tools of empowerment and participation, but which are finding a range of ways to commodify and commercialize what we produce. All of this points to the continued importance of fostering critical media literacy skills as we struggle to achieve and sustain a more participatory culture.

For media institutions, the key thing to recognize is that you no longer have a monopoly over the communication channels, and you no longer—if you ever had—have control over your audiences (Jenkins et al., 2013). Today’s media audiences can draw from a much broader array of media producers— independent as well as mainstream, transnational as well as domestic, digital as well as broadcast, semiprofessional and amateur as well as professional—and they are making informed choices about where to direct their attention. They also have a desire to meaningfully participate in the core conversations of our society, which means they are pushing back against any attempt to control or regulate their speech and are pushing for a greater diversity of voices than could have been heard before. Media institutions are starting to adjust to this changed context, but old mental habits die hard, and there is not yet a full recognition of what they need to do to respect and engage an audience that has other options and other capacities than before.

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