

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with a subtle pattern of vertical lines. Scattered across the cover are several stylized, light-colored leaf motifs, each consisting of a stem with two leaves pointing upwards and to the right.

# THE NEW DIGITAL STORYTELLING

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Bryan Alexander

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# THE NEW DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Creating Narratives with  
New Media

Bryan Alexander



AN IMPRINT OF ABC-CLIO, LLC  
Santa Barbara, California • Denver, Colorado • Oxford, England

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Alexander, Bryan, 1967-

The new digital storytelling: creating narratives with new media / Bryan Alexander.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-313-38749-4 (hardcopy: alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-313-38750-0 (ebook) 1. Interactive multimedia. 2. Digital storytelling. 3. Storytelling—Data processing. I. Title.

QA76.76.I59A42 2011  
006.7—dc22 2010050948

ISBN: 978-0-313-38749-4

EISBN: 978-0-313-38750-0

15 14 13 12 11 1 2 3 4 5

This book is also available on the World Wide Web as an eBook.  
Visit [www.abc-clio.com](http://www.abc-clio.com) for details.

Praeger

An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC

ABC-CLIO, LLC

130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911

Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

This book is printed on acid-free paper (∞)

Manufactured in the United States of America

To my children, Gwynneth and Owain, for their love of stories,  
the stories they have created, and the ones they'll go on to tell.

And to my wife, Ceredwyn, for the story of our love.  
That's the best tale I know.

Our tendency to see and explain the world in common narratives is so deeply ingrained that we often don't notice it—even when we've written the words ourselves. In the Conceptual Age, however, we must awaken to the power of narrative.

—Daniel Pink

Make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em wait.

—attributed to Willkie Collins

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# Acknowledgments

For stories and ideas: Bret Boessen, Thomas Burkdall, Annette S. L. Evans, Steven Kaye, Gail Matthews-DeNatale, Peter Naegele, Ruben Puentedura, Geoff Scranton, Mike Sellers, Ed Webb, and Middlebury College folk Jason Mittell and Hector Vila, the latter for inviting the CDS to teach a workshop and encouraging me to attend; this book owes much to that dual invitation.

Tobin Siebers for getting me to think about the uses of nonfiction stories.

The superb Twitter and Facebook hordes: pfinderson, rivenhomewood, KathrynTomasek, j\_breitenbucher, and all.

Blog commentators Andy Havens, Steve Kaye, D'Arcy Norman, H. Pierce, and more. Infocult is in your debt.

For teaching inspiration: my two genius co-teachers Bret Olsen and Doug Reilly.

For every kind of collaboration, from coauthoring to teaching, inspiration to scheming: my wise and playful teachers Barbara Ganley and Alan Levine.

For all kinds of support and tolerance over many years: my NITLE colleagues. And especially the many NITLE workshop participants, in all their energy, creativity, and generosity.

For helping me through the process of writing the book: Raymond Yee. Howard Rheingold, for endless inspiration and guidance.

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# Introduction

I created my first digital story in 2003. Two brilliant teachers from Berkeley's Center for Digital Storytelling led a workshop at the Center for Educational Technology in Middlebury, Vermont. That latter center inhabited an old building, the former courthouse for Addison County. There, Joe Lambert and Emily Paulos met with a dozen of us, and we learned to turn new technologies to storytelling purposes between gleaming labs and refurbished court offices. We wrote voiceovers while watching the morning sun light up the Green Mountains' slopes, scanned photos under fluorescent lights, and shared our final films on DVD in a darkened, nineteenth-century courtroom.

In a sense, that experience was the genesis of this book. My quirky tale of experiencing *The War of the Worlds* convinced me of the power of blending personal life and digital technology. Through recorded voiceover, photos snagged through Google Images, audio tracks drawn from podcasts, and frantically typed subtitles, I remembered being terrified by a book when I was a child: H. G. Wells's novel of alien invasion, hauntingly illustrated by the late, great Edward Gorey (Looking Glass Library, 1960). I recalled how the memory of that terror returned to me as an adult, when a copy crossed my desk at a used book shop.<sup>1</sup> The Center for Digital Storytelling class helped me remix those memories with technology, drawing forth emotions I'd forgotten, eliciting new reflections. The experience was simultaneously a deep dive into my past, a fast yet effective grappling with multiple technologies, and an epiphany about the new nature of story.

In a different sense, though, I created my first digital stories back in the 1990s, as when I created a virtual haunted mansion for students in my gothic literature class. It was really just a series of Web pages, each holding some small piece of literary criticism or content. Very little media was involved, beyond text, dark backgrounds, and some images. Those

pages were hyperlinked together by logical steps, following a hypothetical yet recognizable building's interior layout. Pages were also connected through hidden pathways, puzzles, and mysteries, appropriately enough. My students had to navigate this monstrous architectural metaphor for a final exam: first to *find* the exam (hidden away in a secret chamber), then to use its form and content as a study guide for the rest of the test. The students were at first terrified (again, appropriately enough) and frantic, nearly delirious when finding the exam link, then simply energetic as they wrote.

I can rewind my digital storytelling life further back into the twentieth century and try to recall writing computer games in BASIC during a very geekish adolescence.<sup>2</sup> From sixth grade into junior high, I typed laboriously onto dumb terminals yoked to distant, hidden mainframes by the early internet. I snatched keyboard and monitor time from the local Radio Shack, learning and experimenting as long as I could before getting kicked out. Space wars and Robert Frost poems, postnuclear adventures and quizzes, even very primitive animations emerged from cryptic alphanumeric lines. These games sometimes let players tell stories, or told stories themselves, back in the last decade of the Cold War.

There is nothing extraordinary in this autobiographic excursus, at least for an American lifetime. These technologies were not secret in 1979, when I was in New York and Michigan sixth grades, but known, and steadily growing in reach. Many people considered these “machines to think with” as tools of imagination, grounds for storytelling.<sup>3</sup> Their story is one of steady experimentation and two generations of creativity, culminating in our time—an extraordinary era for creating and experiencing stories.

## Who Is This Book For?

*The New Digital Storytelling* is aimed at creators and would-be practitioners, first of all—people who want to tell stories with digital technologies for the first time, those who are already using digital tools and want to try new approaches, storytellers using nondigital means (like voice or print) who seek to cross the analog–digital divide. We will cover a wide range of ground, as the field has opened up. You may be a storyteller working in another medium, wanting to explore the digital world. You may be a teacher, or a marketer, or a communications manager. Whatever your background, herein you will find examples to draw on, practical uses to learn from, principles to apply, and some creative inspiration.

You might be considering a full-scale project, such as a YouTube video series, a novel-length e-book, or a blog. Perhaps you are building a game space or virtual environment and expect users (players) to tell themselves the story of their adventures within it. Alternatively, a story may lurk within your conception of that world and will unfurl during the course of its creation. Or perhaps you have a story in mind, a full-length one, and are not sure upon which digital stage (or stages) it should play.

On the other hand, you might not have a full digital story in mind, but are already using digital platforms and social media for various purposes and would like to add the “story factor” to improve your work.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps you do not think of your work as storytelling, or yourself as a storyteller. This book is *especially* intended for you. Each chapter explores principles for better storytelling that can be applied to many situations and at any scale: how to make that PowerPoint presentation less of a death march and more of a compelling narrative; how to increase a blog readership’s attention or better shape a podcast—to any such situation, storytelling proves a helpful advisor.

What this book is *not*: It is not a hands-on manual concerning the technical details of using certain digital media. It does not have the space to delve into the nitty-gritty minutiae of different video editors, wiki markup, and blog hosting options. Instead, this book is based on the mid-1990s Center for Digital Storytelling’s subtle insight: that one can select just enough technology to be dangerous, an appropriate baseline amount to get the narrative going (see chapter 2). The reader is not assumed to be a technologist, and the book’s language is accordingly accessible.

It is also in the social media spirit to recognize that much information is provided by experts located elsewhere. I will outline many technologies in the pages that follow and point to communities and leading experts to connect with in order to find more information. It is my fond hope that readers will be inspired to contribute to various digital storytelling social networks in multiple ways, building still more resources for others.

This book is also not a literary-theory-level study of digital storytelling. I will be drawing on literary criticism, along with media studies, history, and other fields, while avoiding jargon from those fields, much as technical terms are minimized. More literary and theoretical studies of digital storytelling are certainly needed, bringing to bear the formidable hermeneutic tools of contemporary literary criticism. There is already a good amount of work along these lines being done in several allied fields, including net.art

and gaming studies. Those texts will play an important role in this book; this book, however, is not entirely of that sort. Instead, we will explore a wide variety of stories and strategies, applying basic literary and media criticism, in order to inspire creators and their supporters, while entering into texts at enough of a depth to start understanding them.

*The New Digital Storytelling* straddles the awkward yet practical divide between production and consumption, critique and project creation. Ultimately a single book cannot do full justice to both. Instead, it can at best connect one domain with the other, hopefully bringing a kind of stereoscopic vision to bear. Put another way, the core of this book surveys the current state of the technologically enabled art in a way grounded in both contemporary theory and practice.

## Organization of the Book

I begin with a historical sketch in part I. The first chapter tries to untangle the Gordian knot of storytelling, teasing out the different models and modes we inherit in 2010. Chapters 2 and 3 then survey the digital storytelling ancestry, the two generations of computing and narrative practice preceding our time.

The second part of this book surveys the current state of the digital storytelling art. This part proceeds by increasing levels of scale, beginning with simpler and more accessible technologies (text- and image-based social media), advancing through richer media (audio and video), and climaxing with the most advanced forms (gaming small and large). These constitute a series of new platforms for narratives. Some are emergent ones, in the sense of having recently appeared, yielding a good number of examples, and continuing to develop on multiple levels. Others are more mature, if still evolving.

It is important to emphasize the persistence of older, seemingly obsolete or outmoded technologies. As David Edgerton argues, multiple strata of technology continue functioning while and after new ones enter society. Older technologies and practices can maintain their purposes, or become repurposed for new uses.<sup>5</sup> In this book, we examine interactive fiction, a form robust in the early 1980s, alongside augmented reality, an information ecosystem still being born as of this writing. Perhaps the most powerful metaphor for thinking through successive technologies is that of tile imbrications. As each new row of tiles partially obscures, yet partially exposes, already established rows, new technologies often overlap the old, partially but not entirely obscuring their predecessors.

In part III, we turn to new narrative forms emerging from combinations of the storytelling practices sketched out in the preceding chapters. Personal stories, gaming, and social media have each developed quite far in a short period of time, so it is unsurprising that they have begun to connect with each other and crossbreed. Perhaps we can think of the emergent swarm of projects and strategies under the header of “combinatorial storytelling.”

Chapter 8 focuses on how storytelling redistributes itself across multiple platforms. Chapter 9 recognizes the sweeping, global transformation of cyberspace being wrought by mobile devices. New devices have elicited new storytelling designs. Indeed, mobile devices, especially phones, may be emerging as the world’s primary digital storytelling devices.

In chapter 10, we turn to alternate reality games (ARGs), which have grown into one of the most innovative approaches to multimedia storytelling. ARGs demonstrate new techniques for engaging audiences and collaboration. Out of a decade of ARG practice comes the concept of chaotic fiction or chaotic storytelling, which might be considered a good aegis to cover a multitude of narratives. ARGs remix and combine a variety of storytelling approaches covered in previous chapters, from personal stories to casual games.

Another synthesis comes from the intersection of mobile devices, distributed storytelling, gaming, and visualization. Augmented reality, the practice of connecting digital content to the physical world—virtual reality turned inside out—is the subject of chapter 11. As we collectively build a digital laminate over the Earth, it is logical to expect storytelling to appear in this new “Worldboard.”

The fourth part of this book delves into practical methods for building digital stories, including adding “story-ness” to nonstory projects. Chapter 12 describes the different ways a digital storytelling class works, then offers guidelines for creators not working in a workshop environment. The next chapter outlines ways to find new digital stories and storytellers, mapping out the relevant social media landscape. Chapter 14 dives into educational uses of digital storytelling, drawing on my experience in teaching workshops on the topic and helping grow a network of academic practitioners.

The final chapter is a kind of hybrid, a coda that also evokes futurism. After spending the book on the past and present, it makes sense to gesture toward what appears to be coming next. Chapter 15 extrapolates from what we have seen of media practice and digital storytelling old and new, seeing trends forward into the near future.

Each chapter of this book occupies a position on a digital storytelling continuum, stretching between theory and practice. Some chapters are farther toward one end than the other. However, every section is grounded in actual, historical evidence, the fruits of research and networking, since digital storytelling is now old enough to provide a wealth of documentation.

Some of these chapters commence with very short stories, as examples of the practices to be covered, a kind of extended narrative epigraph. Several describe real stories and the process of either consuming or producing them. Others are mildly fictionalized accounts of my experiences with digital storytelling workshops. Still others are instances of what Bruce Sterling and Julian Bleeker describe as “design fiction,” stories that imagine the lived experience of a new object.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of these is partly to give the reader a sense of what the chapter will explore, but also to use a very small form of storytelling in the service of discussing that art.

At a meta level, some chapters address a somewhat dizzying phenomenon, the practices described being nested within stories presented in *other* media, like digital storytelling *matriochka* dolls. This means mobile device storytelling appears as a plot device within other stories, blogs are depicted in print science fiction, and classic interactive fiction is mimicked for political satire. It’s a sign of how widespread or compelling these practices are, that they can be taken up or reproduced elsewhere with hope of audience engagement. Indeed, we can probably identify a nascent metafiction subgenre, a body of stories *about* new digital stories.

## A Note about the Writing of This Book

It is appropriate that a book about new forms of digital storytelling should partake of those new media platforms. I blogged about digital storytelling old and new in two different venues, and also aggregated and tagged examples on a social bookmarking service.<sup>7</sup> Another way I “dogfooded” the book was by crowdsourcing topical discussion during the manuscript’s penultimate month of preparation. I had been using Twitter to explore digital storytelling ever since joining the service. Then in August 2010 I ramped up the process. Every day, I tweeted at least one observation, note, or query to the world and read back as Twitterites (or “tweeple”) returned their thoughts. This book owes much to them, to faithful correspondents and capable observers like rivenhomewood, dethe, and derekbruff. In a very real sense, our Twitter conversations through the course of writing this book constituted a digital story.

This book's social networks are not to blame for any errors or gaps in the text. In covering a broad, rapidly developing, multidomain world, I am certain to have committed some of these. I expect the distributed Argus eyes of social media to identify each one, both sins of omission and commission. All gaps, slips, gaffes, and errors are solely my own.

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PART I

# **Storytelling: A Tale of Two Generations**

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## Chapter 1

# Storytelling for the Twenty-First Century

What is digital storytelling? Simply put, it is telling stories with digital technologies. Digital stories are narratives built from the stuff of cyberculture.

We can also conceive of digital storytelling through examples of it in action, such as:

- A very short story about growing food, made out of remixed archival photographs
- A podcast about medieval history, where each installment takes listeners through the extraordinary lives of Norman rulers
- A blog novel about America in 1968, following two teenagers as they travel through political and personal landscapes
- An account of an alien invasion delivered through multiple Twitter accounts: an updated *War of the Worlds* hoax, tweet by tweet
- A video clip about a mother–daughter relationship over time
- A game of sorts seemingly about *The Matrix*, based on a Web site, but mysteriously extending across multiple platforms including your email inbox
- Novels read on mobile phones—and often written on mobile phones
- Hundreds of Vermont teenagers creating multimedia stories for each other
- A Holocaust victim's life retold by Facebook<sup>1</sup>

Digital stories are currently created using nearly every digital device in an ever-growing toolbox. They are experienced by a large population. Their creators are sometimes professionals, and also amateurs. They can be deeply personal or posthumanly otherwise, fiction and nonfiction, brief or epic, wrought from a single medium or sprawling across dozens. We are living in a time of immense creativity, with new opportunities for creators appearing nearly every day. Several decades of energetic digital

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experimentation have borne fruit, and yet, in the larger historical frame, still these are early days of innovation.

The phrase “digital storytelling” has several interesting resonances as this book is being written, and we can break out some assumptions from them. Pairing those two words can still elicit surprise or even shock for some, if the listener expects the two domains to be fundamentally separate. “Storytelling” suggests the old storyteller, connected to a bardic or Homeric tradition, a speaker enrapturing an immediate audience. As Coleridge and Wordsworth imagined it:

He holds him with his glittering eye—  
The Wedding-Guest stood still,  
And listens like a three years' child:  
The Mariner hath his will.

Stories are spoken and heard, in this classic model. The story is a personal, intimate, analog thing. Therefore cyberspace is a world apart, at its worst a cold domain of data. At best, since many of us now inhabit cyberspace to a degree, this view of story assigns to that vast domain functions which might assist, but not constitute, narrative: communication, database access, entertainment, socialization, document management.

When I teach digital storytelling workshops, as an initial discussion prompt I ask participants to describe what stories are *not*. Inevitably people are surprised, even wrong-footed, as they probably expect to speak to what stories *are* (which is also a fine prompt; see below). Usually the negative answers that emerge identify an item typically associated with the digital world: data, especially data without meaningful patterns. Data are cold, while stories are warm. Data lack intrinsic meaning, while stories are all about meaning.

Other workshop participants see the gap between storytelling and the digital world as based upon a preference for analog media, namely, books, movies, TV, and music. Few will hedge this stance by noting that much seemingly analog content is already being produced and distributed through digital means. Instead they focus on pre-Web devices, like the paperback novel, film stored on reels and projected into a peopled theater, live music, or vinyl records. These objects are more familiar than digital ones to many participants and have an additional aura of ever-increasing historical value. They may be spoken of with love, nostalgia, or pride.

Once brought into conversation, these apparently predigital media help workshop participants describe what makes good storytelling happen.

Thinking of favorite TV shows or novels, workshops quickly summon up examples of appealing characters, solid plots, great scenes, and what makes a particular genre successful. A class can work with such details of either oral or “analog” storytelling and take them into less medium-bound, more generic territory. Conceptually, this abstraction then prepares the ground for reconnecting these concepts with digital platforms. Practically speaking, participants who start thinking about digital storytelling by bearing in mind narrative traditions in which they place value and comfort tend to feel less anxiety about the newer, digital tools.

At a different level, pairing digital storytelling with other narrative traditions brings to mind the sheer scope and persistence of storytelling in the human condition. The historicity of storytelling tempts us to consider the narrative impulse to be a universal one. Every culture tells stories. Each epoch brims with tales, insofar as records make them available.

For our purposes, it’s vital to realize that people tell stories with nearly every new piece of communication technology we invent. Portable video recorders led to video art, starting in the 1960s with the Portapak and Nam June Paik’s work. Long-playing vinyl records enabled concept albums, from Gordon Jenkins’s *Manhattan Towers* (1958) to Jethro Tull’s *Thick as a Brick* (1972) and Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* (1979): a series of songs thematically unified and interrelated by content and/or formal features.<sup>2</sup> The motion picture camera elicited cinema. Radio spawned the “theater of the mind.” The Lascaux caves either represented scenes of daily life or taught viewers hunting and other tasks. Indeed, no sooner do we invent a medium than do we try to tell stories with it.

What, then, are stories? It’s often productive to see how people react when asked to answer that question themselves in conversation, in class, or as an audience. As a teacher and presenter, I have seen every single audience energized by the question. Their faces light up with memory of stories and storytellers; their heads tilt in forceful, almost physical recollection. Goofy smiles and critically engaged frowns appear and disappear in succession. Asking the question “What is a story?” is a more positive and productive exercise than asking the opposite, as answers come more quickly, tend to expressive positive emotions, and are often usefully diverse.

Answering this question, some will volunteer versions of the Freytag triangle, usually without naming it. This is the customary sequence of exposition or introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and a dénouement, first codified by the German writer Gustav Freytag (1816–1895) in the nineteenth century. Nearly every person will recognize this sequence on its own

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terms, perhaps rephrased in the ancient trinity of beginning, middle, and end, or through variations like inception through crisis and resolution. A story is simply a thing, any media object, which demonstrates this clear sequence. Some workshop participants will recognize this notion from either Robert McKee's influential screenwriting book *Story* or the 2002 film *Adaptation*, both of which reference that approach explicitly. McKee also (and usefully) expands that three-step sequence to include five stages: inciting incident, progressive complications, crisis, climax, and then resolution.<sup>3</sup>

The linear nature of stories is crucial to many definitions of *story*. Events arranged in time, or an event broken down into a temporal sequence: these make intuitive sense. Given that stories reassemble previously existing materials (language, media, audience, lives), perhaps we can go further and see stories as consisting of some selections from the set of available cultural practices, crafted to represent events chronologically. But focusing on the importance of time to stories risks being too obvious. How can a story exist outside of time, beyond the cliché of being timeless? If we emphasize time's role in the definition of storytelling, Will Eisner's definition of comics as "sequential art" could be translated and applied to any storytelling form or practice at all.<sup>4</sup>

Some story definitions appear to reflect a frustration with other media—hence the argument that stories are objects (books, movies, documents, etc.) with *meaning*. This definition opposes a story to a pile of data, or a document that is difficult to parse, or an experimental work that is challenging to grasp. Related to this sense of story as meaning-vehicle are definitions that place *engagement* in the foreground. In this model, stories are that which pull in the viewer/reader/listener; nonstories (or very bad stories) are things which do not attempt to engage us, or fail miserably at it. As Nick Montfort argues, a story "has a point. There's a reason for introducing it, there's a reason for bringing it up. If it means something to our situation, and to the way we talk to one other, *then we're doing storytelling*."<sup>5</sup> Documentarian Sheila Bernard places engagement at the root of storytelling: "A *story* is the narrative, or telling, of an event or series of events, crafted in a way to interest the audiences, whether they are readers, listeners, or viewers."<sup>6</sup>

The reason for a story—its point, its meaning—can be understood as a theme: "the general underlying subject of a specific story, a recurring idea that often illuminates an aspect of the human condition."<sup>7</sup> The full sweep of emotions and details ground that theme, making it accessible and engaging. Daniel Pink sees these as definitional: "Story exists where high concept and high touch intersect. Story is high concept because it sharpens our

understanding of one thing by showing it in the context of something else. . . . Story is high touch because stories almost always pack an emotional response.”<sup>8</sup> Radio artist Ira Glass considers a story’s theme or meaning—“why the hell you’re listening to this story”—as one of storytelling’s two essential “building blocks.”<sup>9</sup>

Another way of contrasting data with stories is to classify some short narratives as data points: too small to consider as whole stories, but useful as material out of which to *build* stories. The Cognitive Edge group calls these “microcontent anecdotes” and urges organizations to generate as many of them as possible. They can then be used later on:

An anecdote is a naturally occurring story, as found in the “wild” of conversational discourse. Anecdotes are usually short and about a single incident or situation. Contrast this with a purposeful story, which is long and complex as well as deliberately constructed and told (usually many times).<sup>10</sup>

Here we see stories distinguished by scale, a kind of quantitative argument: anecdotes are short and focused, while stories are longer and focus on larger or multiple topics. Anecdotes are also concrete, while stories build toward abstract knowledge out of them. Put another way, Cognitive Edge makes a distinction between uncodified knowledge and knowledge codified through narrative. Stories decode and encode.<sup>11</sup> Glass offers a similar view, using the same term, “anecdote,” as one of the essential building blocks of stories.<sup>12</sup>

No writer offers a hard-and-fast rule for distinguishing small from large, anecdote from story. No precise measurement of clip length nor word count can be sustained (see the discussion of Hemingway’s six-word story in chapter 13). But the scale differential can work as a rule of thumb, if applied to our consideration of small bits of multimedia, such as images, sound effects, or maps. Stories are assemblages, storytelling a kind of scaling up.

A related approach to understanding meaning in a story is to focus on a problem or crisis, especially a personal one. On the face of it, such a model seems obvious; what kind of story is there without some problem or struggle? It is, after all, easy to dislike a story for its lack of significant problem, which leaves an impression of dullness or emotional flatness. Sheila Bernard notes: “If something is easy, there’s no tension, and without tension, there’s little incentive for an audience to keep watching.”<sup>13</sup> We can readily dismiss a story in the mystery genre for having made the killer’s identity

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too easy to solve, or a romance where the lovers' obstacles are too quickly overcome. Stories seem to require a challenge at their heart, one for characters to work through and for readers or listeners to appreciate.

Problem-based storytelling is a popular model in the literature. For example, Jason Ohler calls his problem-based model the "story core" and breaks it down in three parts. First, a "central challenge" must be evident—"a question, a problem, an obstacle, an opportunity, or a goal." This "creates tension that gives the story its forward momentum, which in turn produces listener involvement." Second, characters change as they wrestle with the problem. "Either life or 'the old you' pushes back as new circumstances or 'a new you' struggles to emerge." Third, the problem receives closure: "solving a mystery, slaying a dragon, reaching a goal, applying new academic knowledge or learning processes, overcoming an obstacle. . . . Closure by no means implies a happy ending, just a resolution of events."<sup>14</sup>

Problems can be escalated in scale to a far greater level than the personal, according to the mythic school of storymaking. This stems from the early twentieth century's anthropological boom, climaxing for storytelling purposes in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell claimed to have identified a monomyth of a hero's journey, an *ur*-tale or Jungian archetype with deep, regular underpinnings. The hero is summoned to extraordinary challenge, faces strenuous and even deadly obstacles, overcomes them, and then returns home victoriously. Campbell saw this pattern embodied in myths and ancient stories with local variations, from the lives of Buddha and Christ to Greek epics.

Campbell's monomyth is a staple of many storytelling approaches, having reached an acme of fame in its association with George Lucas and the (chronologically) first *Star Wars* movie. Some schools broaden the hero's journal into a set of myths, or simply the strategy of crafting a story to draw on popular, radical-appearing myths. This is the basis of James Bonnet's screenwriting work, connecting writers to mythic plots in order to create better scripts.<sup>15</sup> As another screenwriting guru, Robert McKee, argues: "An archetypal story creates settings and characters so rare that our eyes feast on every detail, while the telling illuminates conflicts so true to humankind that it journeys from culture to culture."<sup>16</sup>

The mythic school has garnered criticism over the decades, beginning with Campbell's focus on male characters to the all-too-frequent exclusion of women. The mythopoeic approach is also critiqued for the way it necessarily diminishes the importance of craft and media specificity. Further, it falls in and out of fashion depending on the status of Carl Jung's reputation.

Perhaps the most important objection to the mythic approach for our digital storytelling purposes is the way myth sidesteps the materials of everyday life. Rather than looking for mythic substrata in the quotidian, we can respect the details and stories of our lives, letting them resonate on their own terms. That is part of the genius and appeal of the Center for Digital Storytelling methodology, which is built upon giving voice to every participant, regardless of his or her professional ambition or life experience. Or, as Annette Simmons argues: “Myths and fables are not the only timeless stories. There are stories of your life, from your family, in your work experience that if you told them, would activate a deep recognition in almost any human being in the world.”<sup>17</sup>

In my workshop experience, both approaches—mythic and everyday—appeal strongly to participants engaged in the creative process. Both clearly appeal to us as media consumers, as even a casual glance at the media landscape reveals.

Engagement can be also understood as a kind of mystery, a story in whatever medium elicits the audience’s curiosity and makes us want to experience more of it. Consider, for example, a famous opening line:

The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door.  
(Fredric Brown, “Knock,” 1948)

The first sentence immediately summons up a sense of vast catastrophe, a crisis already passed. The second then shocks our sense of the first, eliciting a frisson of wonder: who, *what* could it be? An alien? A robot? A woman, if “man” means “male”? A mere seventeen words in and the reader is hooked, driven on toward the lines that follow.

Compare that one with these famous openings:

- “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen” (George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949).
- “Last night, I dreamt I went to Manderley again” (Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*, 1938).
- “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, 1984).
- “As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect” (Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, 1915).<sup>18</sup>

Each of these presents us with mysteries. How can a clock strike thirteen? (Answer: military time.) What is Manderley, why did the narrator go there

before, and why once more? What does that kind of sky look like, and how did it get that way? How on Earth did this Gregor Samsa person become a bug, and what does it mean? These openers are mysterious enough to engage us, without being so cryptic that we cannot quickly find meaning in them. They are puzzles we want to decode.

For creators, this kind of mysterymaking can seem wrongheaded and perverse, especially in nonfiction contexts. After all, we come to tell stories in order to *share* our material, not to *conceal* it. Yet concealing the matter of a story in a way that pulls in attention can engage the audience enough that they will deliberately pay more attention to the story. As Bernard writes of documentary filmmaking, as a creator “your goal is to create a film that’s driven by a story, one that will motivate even general viewers to *want* to know more of those details that thrill you. They’ll grow to care because those details will matter to the story unfolding on screen.”<sup>19</sup> In chapter 2, we will reference Espen Aarseth’s idea of experiencing hypertext fiction and gaming as a “work path,” where such stories are predicated on an audience’s effort. But a good story wins its audience to efforts on its behalf even without the formal device of hypertext or games, through careful use of mystery. This is the root of interactivity, and of co-creation.

Compare such mysterious story elements to a bad PowerPoint presentation. The latter does not draw us in, failing to summon our willing efforts to see it advance. Instead, the poor PowerPoint depresses us with the prospect of its extension into the future. It is a spectacle of inertia, a kind of audience assassination. We do not want the presenter to advance the slides, unless it is done quickly. We viewers and listeners come to expect that the next slide will appear monotonously through PowerPoint’s sequential logic.<sup>20</sup>

A presentation that uses storytelling well, by contrast, makes the audience *want* the next slide to appear. Individual slides might seem incomplete, but in a way that elicits our desire to finish them ourselves. Two or more can seem to be a puzzle for which we can supply an answer. Alternatively, we may come to expect that the next slide, or one further along, will complete the puzzle for us; this is a form of trust won by decent storytelling.<sup>21</sup> We will return to puzzles throughout this book, especially in gaming; for now, consider them another part of the story mystery, of stories.

Another classic sense of story emphasizes representation of life to an audience, or *mimesis*. We find this theme as early as Plato and Aristotle, and mimesis persists as a storytelling theme throughout the subsequent history of aesthetics. Representation does not require a story to occur, as

the non-narrative arts attest. For a story to connect with an audience, however, it must represent something recognizable from life.

Simmons sees the skill of storytelling as “the unique capability to tap into *a complex situation we have all experienced and which we all recognize*.”<sup>22</sup> This is a form of connection to the audience, on par with the sense of engagement discussed earlier. But it is in the service of carrying one part of life (a situation) to another (the audience). Simmons recommends that creators develop skills with empathy and sensory detail, in order to better connect with their readers or listeners. This aligns well with this definition from *Wikipedia*: “Storytelling is the conveying of events in words, images and sounds often by improvisation or embellishment.” In this sense, stories are events conveyed to an audience through the skillful use of media.

Instead of reproducing events or situations through art, perhaps stories are essentially about representing people. My workshop participants inevitably deem personal content to be part of a story. They value highly stories that feature appealing characters, but generally like those with any characters at all. Charles Baxter, a leading teacher of writing, emphasizes characters as being essential to a story through their desires: “Without a mobilized desire or fear, characters in a story—or life—won’t be willing to do much of anything in the service of their great longings.”<sup>23</sup> The Center for Digital Storytelling (about which see chapter 2) bases its curriculum upon personal stories, those about the creator’s life or concerning the life of someone who deeply affected the creator. Jason Ohler, an educator who teaches with digital stories, argues that stories usually work when

they have at their heart an effective story core: a central character . . . that undergoes a transformation in order to solve a problem, answer a question, meet a goal, resolve an issue, or realize the potential of an opportunity.<sup>24</sup>

Bernard agrees, referring to “the way or ways in which the events of a story transform your characters” as an *arc*. Sam Pollard, interviewed by Bernard, describes a character arc as “a transformation of a state of being.”<sup>25</sup> A story without such an arc will often feel flat, its emotional range blunted. A character who does not change in a story is not a person but a trading card.

Put another way, we deem characters storyworthy through multiple, overlapping validations. Does a character seem convincing, realistic, human? (See a related note on gaming and consistency in chapter 6.) Do we empathize with them, feel an emotional connection? These two