



COVER SHEET

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Memory and community
Individual paper

The problems and possibilities of using digital storytelling in public history projects.

Kelvin Grove is a small inner-city working-class suburb, which has always been a gathering point for various people. While never densely populated, the 16-hectares of land that is now the heart of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) – a Department of Housing redevelopment -- has been a meeting place for indigenous clans, and military and educational institutions that have shaped Brisbane and Queensland. Each of these groups has its own history, but collectively their stories offered an opportunity to compose a public history project about Kelvin Grove as a place with an evolving and complex identity.

A multi-art form public history project has offered a range of possibilities for the telling of this history, while also increasing a sense of community, and for allowing individuals, through the use of oral history and digital storytelling (DST) in particular, to construct a personal sense of place, identity and history.

My interest in DST techniques focuses largely on the act of encouraging or coaxing the participants into sharing their stories, rather than on the technical production of a digital story. Oral history interviewing techniques are relevant here, though the final DST product is achieved through a short, written script, the writing of which is guided by the facilitator according to basic creative writing principles of keeping a theme, a focus, a personal voice, some structure in terms of introduction and closure, and writing in the first person.

New technologies of communication such as the Internet are altering both the form and the content possible for historical discourse, with the processes of transmission

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arguably becoming less conventionally narrative-based, more visual and increasingly individuated. Increasingly, visual life-story alternatives are being explored to offer an appealing alternative to written narrative-based historical discourse.¹ DST is one alternative way of using new media to engage community.²

DST is a relatively new form of telling personally narrated stories, which originates from the University of California at Berkley's Digital Storytelling Centre, headed by Jo Lambert. The BBC's *Capturing Wales* and *Telling Lives* projects, initiated by academic and photographer Daniel Meadows (after he was trained by Lambert), were the UK's introduction to the medium. *Video Nation*,³ another current web-based BBC initiative that started on television over ten years ago, may claim to be the forerunner to digital stories. Their two-minute video diaries are sent in from around the UK, where participants have first attended workshops to acquire skills in using a video camera and writing a script. It was a project that was groundbreaking in its time and inspired UK digital storytellers like Daniel Meadows.⁴

QUT is also at the forefront of projects using DST, as in the YIRN project⁵ and the ictPR projects⁶ with Jo Tacchi, but they have previously not been used as part of a specific history project as they are in *Sharing Stories*, and so it is with great interest that I continue to track these other emerging public projects, from a history perspective.

¹ Nancy Thumim is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her work focuses on 'ordinary peoples' stories, which she believes have become a familiar part of the media and cultural landscape in the UK. This research paper discusses two projects, both of which have invited members of the public to represent themselves — BBC Wales' digital storytelling project, Capture Wales and the Museum of London's oral history project, London's Voices — in order to explore some of the processes of mediation entailed in producing such stories for public display:

Thumim, Nancy. "Mediated Self Representations: "Ordinary People" In "Communities"." London School of Economics and Political Science, 2005.

² "The Kelvin Grove Urban Village Sharing Stories History Project". Brisbane, 2005. Queensland Department of Housing. 10.4.05 2005.

"London Voices". London, 2004. oral history project-Rob Perks. Museum of London. 8.9.04 2004. <www.museumoflondon.org.uk/MOLsite/londonvoices/>.

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/>

⁴ Meadows, Daniel. "Creative Director Digital Storytelling BBC ". email, 21.11.05.

⁵ Youth Internet Radio Network: <http://cirac.qut.edu.au/yirn/>

⁶ Information, communication, technology Poverty Reduction project: <http://cirac.qut.edu.au/ictpr/> Conf.paper/IOHA/sydney2006/klaebe-final

Dianna Allan, a Harvard academic using oral history as a research methodology suggests that the Internet, videos and CDs are generating representational practices that are increasingly visual and offer an appealing alternative to non-visual, narrative-based historical discourse: "the Internet, television and satellite are inflecting the articulation of collective history and the form of historical consciousness within our communities."⁷ Whether these techniques can be employed to remember personal experiences in relation to a large history project is being explored during the course of my research using digital storytelling.

Public money is being increasingly offered in Australia to capture stories and engage the community, through projects like the \$3 million *Australian Stories*,⁸ or the Queensland State Library's *Queensland Stories*⁹, and perhaps funding opportunities may continue if Prime Minister John Howard's 2006 New Year Address is any indication. We may find, as Thumin did in the UK,¹⁰ that practitioners of oral history techniques are turning their attention to DST as a medium that may compliment the aural or video oral history interview.

I have attended DST master class workshops with both Daniel Meadows and Jo Lambert to study their differing DST techniques. I have compared them to those employed by QUT DST facilitators to use in a practical sense to inform my approach to the *Sharing Stories* DST workshops.

Although my field work is not complete, I have found there are problems and great opportunities with using DST in a history project, and the difficulties I have encountered can be avoided, or at least minimalised, by careful management in facilitating DST from the outset of the project. The five main concerns for the facilitator are: being sure of your purpose (audience), IP and copyright issues,

⁷ Allan, Dianna. "Mythologizing the Nakba: 1948 Narratives in the Production of Collective Identity and Cultural Practice among Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon." *XIII International Oral History Conference- Memory and Globalisation*. Rome: International Oral History Association, 2004.

⁸ "Australian Stories". Canberra, 2004. Australian Commonwealth Government. 10.3.04 2004. <<http://www.deh.gov.au/heritage/programs/sharing/guide.html>>.

⁹ "Queensland Stories". Brisbane, 2005. Queensland State Library. 17.11.05 2005. <<http://www.qldstories.slq.qld.gov.au/>>.

¹⁰ Thumim, Nancy. "Mediated Self Representations: "Ordinary People" In "Communities"." London School of Economics and Political Science, 2005.

comprehensive initial research, ethical issues regarding the process of scripting the story and being mindful of identity -- both collectively and of the individual.

Public history projects are often as much about capturing the 'ordinary' person's reminiscences and anecdotes, and thereby engaging the present community, as they are about capturing the past.

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton of the Australian Centre for Public History believe public historians need to be concerned with addressing the relationship between audience, practice and social context.¹¹ The mantra of the KGUV *Sharing Stories* project is to collate and build on the historical archives and to connect the community through participatory activities and public events.

The facilitator's role in any public history project is to produce engaging community outcomes, but also to protect the interest of all participants. While explaining the outcomes of an oral history transcript may seem simple enough, in an ever increasing digital and multi media environment it is even harder to give participants a true indication of what 'being available on the web' actually means. This is even harder when the medium is a digital story. The visual and aural narrative representation of a digital story can be very powerful and emotional -- not only for the storyteller, but depending on the anecdote, also for their family and friends. The presentational viewing for the community can be a very positive emotive experience, but often digital stories are also linked to a website. How does one easily explain to an eighty-six year old, what it means to be 'available on the web', when they don't own a computer?¹² The answer is perhaps you can't, but you can make sure you do sit down with every participant and do your best to try--including accessing other examples of digital stories with them on a computer from the other side of the world, like the work of Daniel Meadows from the BBC *Capturing Wales* site.

¹¹ Another ARC Discovery recipient, suggesting the Federal Government also is valuing the importance of researching connectedness in the community.

¹² Mrs Minna Brennan was an eighty-six year old participant in our 2004 DST workshop
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Care can also be taken to ensure that the use of the material is limited (in most circumstances) to the project it was created for and that each participant still retains his or her individual copyright, and the right to change their mind about its end use.

A professional approach to public history also includes conducting thorough background research at the outset of the history being undertaken. Oral history is often an important element of the collective social history gathering process, and can also be a sound tool to help inform the public historian, and may help them identify possible participants who would be well animated through digital storytelling.

It is important to understand the fallibility and subjectivity that the process of recalling memory can bring, to not only an oral history interview, but also to digital storytelling. Verena Alberti, believes: “An event or a situation lived by the interviewee cannot be transmitted to any other person without being narrated”.¹³ But while the use of the participant’s own voice, and the telling of ‘their’ story is primary in oral history techniques, Allan Bryman, Robert Burgess¹⁴ and Joanna Bornat¹⁵ agree that the assistance of the facilitator is crucial in encouraging the participant to accept that their story is worth telling and in providing an enabling space for the telling—this is even more important in digital storytelling, as often the participant is unsure what their resonant narrative will be. Even more difficult can be the facilitator’s role to guide the participants through the process of creating a ‘scripted’ story that retains the authenticity of their own voice.

My research, thus far, has focused on trends and attitudes toward community storytelling and the associated methodologies practiced that specifically deal with the magnitude of managing the processes of memory recall for large projects. Donald Ritchie critically discusses ways of minimising problems associated with memory recall on large historical projects, such as highlighting the need to check interviews

¹³ Alberti, Verena. "Beyond the Versions: Possibilities of the Narrative in Oral History Interviews." XIII International Oral History Conference- Memory and Globalisation. Rome: International Oral History Association, 2004.

¹⁴ Bryman, A, and R Burgess, eds. Qualitative Research. Vol. 4, 1999.

¹⁵ Bornat, J. "Is Oral History Auto/Biography?" Qualitative Research. Eds. A Bryman and R Burgess. London: Sage, 1999. 193-205.

with traditional historical evidence and to understand that people culturally will often 'shape' (that is, reshape) stories over time.¹⁶ I have found this good advice also fits well with digital storytelling for a public history project. In his years working as a historian for the U.S. Senate, Ritchie has come to expect stories to alter as the years pass, but does not see this as a problem, if it is anticipated. Ritchie says, "Like historians, individuals reinterpret their historical memories and recast earlier judgements. Memories can mellow over time."¹⁷

Jan Vansini reiterates Ritchie's thoughts by suggesting that historians creating collective histories must understand the importance of reflecting the traditions of both past and present, "in the same breath":

Oral traditions are documents of the present, because they are told in the present. Yet they embody a message of the past, so they are expressions of the past at the same time. They are a representation of the past in the present.¹⁸

Alistair Thomson, whose oral history research produced 'Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend',¹⁹ insists military historians rightly argue that personal narratives illuminate experiences which might otherwise be undocumented, particularly those of 'ordinary' men and women in the ranks, and offer insights into the meanings of events for participants. He found that oral history was useful in conveying atmosphere, but concedes it can be highly unreliable and that "research should scrape away the contaminants of memory to reveal the kernel of original experience."²⁰ He adds:

... the reasons why people relate and record their life stories — the 'autobiographical imperative' -- have a significant impact upon what they choose to say about their lives. The 'psychic underlay' of personal testimony, the deep-rooted psychological forces that shape our experience and which inform the struggle to make sense, and to create a story that works for us and a past we can live with.²¹

¹⁶ Ritchie, Donald. "Mccarthyism in Memory and History." XIII International Oral History Conference-Memory and Globalisation. Rome: International Oral History Association, 2004.

¹⁷ Ritchie, Donald. "Foreward." Memory and History - Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience. Eds. J Jeffrey and G Edwall. Lanham: University Press of 1994.

¹⁸ Vansina, J. Oral Tradition as a History. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985.

¹⁹ Thomson, Alistair. Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend. Oxford University Press, 1994.

²⁰ Thomson, Alistair. "Voices We Never Hear: The Unsettling Story of Post War 'Ten Pound Poms' Who Returned to Britain." Oral History Association of Australia 24 (2002): 52-59.

²¹ *ibid*

Digital stories are similar in this regard, because they are purposefully constructed -- not subconsciously, as may be the case in an oral history interview. The KGUV site was home to a military barracks for nearly 100 years and a mix of military related tales included in the DST reflects this heritage. The next DST workshop will include collaborative digital stories from specific military groups who were stationed at Kelvin Grove²² and it will be an interesting development to see if this approach has the same aesthetic and historically emotive impact as other digital stories. As it will be a group collaboration, this may prove to be another check against possible 'contaminants' of history.

Tim Bowden, a high-profile Australian broadcaster and oral historian, finds the spoken interview material to be an indivisible tool as an author of non-fiction biography, history and travel books. He regards the manipulation of the oral history transcript as an important ethical dilemma: "Skillfully handled quotations can reflect the class and educational background of contributors, without giving offence"²³. The benefit of a digital story is that as the participant uses their own words and language to bring the story to life. As Bowden suggests, this also tells the audience far more about the person in the story than the pictures and written script can do alone, which in turn alerts the public historian to issues of identity.

Dianna Allan of Harvard University believes the emphasis on place in historical narratives in relation to identity, authenticity and belonging, investigates the restoration of community through local narratives; the merging of personal memory with pedagogical commemoration to the point where past experiences permeate the fabric of everyday contemporary life.²⁴

²² The 9th Battalion, the Artillery and the Signallers Corp.

²³ Bowden, Tim. "Let's Not Throw the Baby out with the Bath Water." Oral History Association of Australia 27 (2005).

²⁴ Allan, Dianna. "Mythologizing the Nakba: 1948 Narratives in the Production of Collective Identity and Cultural Practice among Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon." XIII International Oral History Conference- Memory and Globalisation. Rome: International Oral History Association, 2004.

Allan points out that “it is now widely acknowledged that memory, like identity, is not immutable and continuously adapts to the needs of the community, engaged as much with present as with past interests of the group.”²⁵

She suggests the oral history transcripts be used in a partial form, taking the shape of anecdotal reminiscences that are subtle, associative and often more deeply concerned with commenting on the present than memorializing the past. DST is a good way to do this.

Sally Chandler’s research into generational characteristics of different time periods found generational cohorts share assumptions, values and patterns of talk. She argues there are age-related changes in memory, as experiences are gathered across a lifetime²⁶. Chandler suggests that both cultural myths and autobiographical memory provide a base for “constructing coherent stories of who we are, both as individuals and within a community.” I anticipate that her conclusion that older cohorts collectively agree upon social identities may well be pertinent to the people I interview and the timeframe about which we discuss. This has been borne out in early interviews and digital stories with elderly members of the community who clearly derived both an individual and generational identity from their experience of the Second World War.

Public historians are not usually also psychologists, but as is the case in oral history interviewing, creating a digital story can be a powerfully emotive experience for the participant and this fact needs to be acknowledged. Participants often talk about the therapeutic nature of workshops and this was illuminated in the research results of Jenny Kidd, whose PhD was based on the BBC *Capturing Wales* DST project.

²⁵ Allan, Dianna. "Mythologizing the Nakba: 1948 Narratives in the Production of Collective Identity and Cultural Practice among Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon." XIII International Oral History Conference- Memory and Globalisation. Rome: International Oral History Association, 2004.

²⁶ Chandler, Sally. "Oral History across Generations: Influences of Age and Generational Identity in the Creation of Oral Histories." XIII International Oral History Conference- Memory and Globalisation. Rome: IOHA, 2004.

Kidd's research found the workshops had great 'side benefits', like a sense of achievement for the participants on a personal level.²⁷ I found similar testimonies after our workshop. One participant, who lives in a local retirement home, said the staff and other residents treated her differently after the screening of her story. She would get comments like 'make way for the movie star' as she passed through the common areas and her own children were suddenly interested to read the diaries she had kept since she was in her teens.²⁸ One of Jenny Kidd's participant's wrote, "I will always be grateful to BBC Wales for the opportunity to loose my inhibitions about my poor English and spelling and get on with telling a story."²⁹ Like oral history interviews, DST is proving to be a 'leveler', no matter what the socio-economic profile of the participant is — giving each person an equal voice.

DST is still a relatively new medium and a novel component to public history. Early research indicates that DST compliments a more traditional oral and archival history approach and encourages broad inclusive participation and interest within the local community and beyond. Like any public history, IP and copyright issues are important, but perhaps a little more complicated for facilitators, if the final content will be web-based. More time is needed to help possible participants understand what 'accessible on the web' means. Comprehensive research still needs to be undertaken to conduct a public history project. DST is not a 'short cut' or a 'quick way' of presenting a public history; instead it offers 'snapshots' and can highlight aspects of historical interest in an engaging, social manner.

Unlike oral history interviews, digital stories are purposefully scripted and constructed narratives, which may not be the emphatic truth, but instead are subjective stories created and told as we might 'craft' a story tell to a friend, or perhaps pass on to our children. Digital stories are snippets of peoples' lives and are another way of enhancing public history; by connecting with communities -- both

²⁷ Kidd, Jenny. "Capturing Wales: Digital Storytelling at the BBC." (2005).

²⁸ Brennan, M. Ed. Helen Klæbe. Brisbane, 2005. telephone interview.

²⁹ Kidd, Jenny. "Capturing Wales: Digital Storytelling at the BBC." (2005).

physically and emotively; adding social input to the archived history; and as a secondary benefit, giving a sense of achievement on a personal level to participants.

DST is another possibility to add to a multi art form public history project. If care is taken by the public historian to ensure the process is a positive experience for participants, DST can be a powerfully emotive by-product of oral history interviewing, which can be easily accessible (and exhibitable) and offer an insight to our collective social history.