Ethnographic Storytelling on the Internet: Exploring Folkvine.org and the East Mims Oral History Project Web site

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Abstract

In recent years ethnographically based interactive Web design projects have focused on the intersection of expressive culture and new technology. This paper will examine two folklore-based Web site projects, Folkvine and the East Mims Oral History Project Web site, as experiments in the combination of the distinctive features of digital technologies and environments with the reflexive and narrative turn in anthropology. Telling ethnographic stories employs storytelling techniques common to narrators in other genres. Using these techniques in a digital environment involves making the most of the characteristic features of hypermedia, including immersion, imitation, non-linearity and interactivity. In addition, transferring the lessons of reflexive ethnography to Web design involves developing an ongoing process of listening and negotiation unlike traditional Web site paradigms.

INTRODUCTION

This paper[1] examines the use of new media to tell the stories of Florida artists and communities on the Web. Folkvine and the East Mims Oral History Project Web site, both part of the Cultural Heritage Alliance Web site at the University of Central Florida School of Film and Digital Media (UCF Cultural Heritage Alliance n.d.), each seek new ways to not only show fieldwork materials, but to allow users to experience them as well. The field of Digital Media provides an intriguing arena for addressing contemporary concerns in the area of ethnographic storytelling. The goal of these folklore-oriented Web sites is to develop a model for experiencing and interpreting folklife materials in ways that more actively involve the audience—where the research process is enacted more than presented in words. Beyond providing context for the understanding of cultural stories, these projects attempt to build into the design and navigation structure of the Web sites themselves the experiential dimension of ethnography and interpretations of meaning. The creation of the Folkvine.org and Mims Web sites are experiments in ways to use the characteristics of digital environments (see, for example, Sherry Turkle 1984, 1995 and Marshall McLuhan 1994) and to reflect the narrative turn in folklore and anthropology (inaugurated by James Clifford and George Marcus 1986).

The Folkvine.org Web site began two years ago as a joint project between the UCF Texts and Technology program and the Cultural Heritage Alliance in the School of Film and Digital Media and funded by the Florida Humanities Council. This project seeks to find new ways to present the stories of Florida folk artists and their communities online. The objective of each artist's Web site is to provide a visual analogy for their work—it should look, and moving through it should "feel," like the artwork of that particular artist. Over time, the Web site and Folkvine project team have grown, and to date seven artist Web sites have been completed. Each is shown at a public premiere to the artist and members of his/her community at which feedback on the site is solicited and subsequently incorporated into the revised site. This year, with the addition of virtual tour guides that link all seven sites according to humanities themes including re-creative identity, place-making imagination, and social economy (and the animated "bobble-head" versions of Folkvine team members commenting at different points on the site within the tour guides), the Web site has become even more complex as an experiment in new ways of presenting art, culture, and scholarship online.

 The East Mims Oral History Project Web site, another project of the UCF Cultural Heritage Alliance, grew out of folklife survey work conducted as part of a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. The Web site is an effort to create a lasting record of the history and culture of East Mims, an historically African-American section of north Brevard County in Central Florida. Community elders are sharing their memories and knowledge of the region's citrus and other industries as well as the contributions to the community of local churches and local Civil Rights leaders Harry T. and Harriette V. Moore. Working with East Mims residents, the Brevard County Historical Commission and the Moore Park in East Mims, faculty and students at the UCF Cultural Heritage Alliance created an interactive exhibit to share the story of this community on the Internet. The site is designed as a virtual map of Mims, with sections for churches, citrus groves, a historic Black school, and a river where baptisms took place. As the visitor moves around the map, the history—and contemporary—cultural landscape of the community is revealed through a combination of myriad techniques and materials, including: oral history clips, 3D modeling of building interiors, and Flash animation to recreate scenes narrated in interviews. For example, in the section on churches, the visitor can enter St. James Missionary Baptist Church to learn about hymn-lining (call and response) through leafing through a multimedia hymnal embedded with the sounds and sights of deacons and churchgoers. The project resulted from continued consultation with community leaders and interested members to determine key themes, and the site was premiered a public event in Mims at which feedback was solicited and incorporated into the final site. The project has become the model for a future oral history-digital media based project set in nearby Winter Garden, FL, where a historical theater is being renovated and community members have stories to tell about its history and connection to daily life and the history of Black-White relations in the area.

ETHNOGRAPHIC STORYTELLING AND HYPERMEDIA

Telling compelling ethnographic stories employs storytelling techniques that translate from medium to medium. Richard Mitchell and Kathy Charmaz (1998) discuss five strategies for effective ethnographic storytelling: "(a) pulling the reader into the story, (b) re-creating experiential moods within the writing, (c) adding elements of surprise, (d) reconstructing the experience through written images, and (e) creating closure on the story while simultaneously recognizing it as part of an ongoing process" (Mitchell and Charmaz 1998: 228-229). Using these techniques in Web design requires making targeted use of hypermedia's characteristics, including its capacity for immersion, imitation, non-linearity, and interactivity.

The ethnographic storytelling technique of pulling the reader into the story can be accomplished by supplying context and suggesting what will occur next. This means the presentation needs to establish a clear point of view and to set a mood. Brenda Danet (2001), citing Janet Murray's 1997 influential work on digital narrative, points out that the concept of immersion is central to Murray's ideas about digital environments. This sense of immersion into an "elaborately simulated place" is a key feature of both the Folkvine and Mims Web site projects (Murray 1997: 71).

On the Folkvine.org splash page introduction the viewer is literally invited to come inside. The experience of taking a tour—here represented initially as a road trip—through Florida becomes the organizing analogy that draws the visitor in. Visitors are told—much like motorists driving along Florida toll roads:

> Explorin' Florida
> Without a guide?
> To see great art
> Just come inside.

Visitors are then led to an "Old Florida"-style visitors' center much like the ones Florida travelers pass and occasionally stop in to explore. The interior of the visitors' center draws the audience into the story by supplying context and suggesting what occurs next.

In the visitors' center on the Folkvine.org site, then, immersion and imitation are used to establish a kind of story world where visitors can navigate aspects of this so-called "script" in a fun and interactive way. Visitors are encouraged to pick up a postcard—with each one representing a link to each artists' Web site. While the splash page is perhaps particularly immersive, the interior of each of the individual Web sites are designed with imitation as a primary vehicle for conveying the story of each artist and his/her community.

Each artist's Web site, in different ways and to differing degrees, establishes a point of view, encourages emotional involvement, and establishes a mood. Lilly Carrasquillo, for example, an artist and educator from Puerto Rico who works primarily in acrylics and papier mache, is introduced to the visitor through the

visual metaphor of a Mexican-inspired mask animated (using Flash software) with pop-up navigation cues incorporating shapes inspired by designs in Taino petroglyphs (Tainos are the original inhabitants of Puerto Rico). Navigating Lilly's site enacts—a key term here—the process of learning about Puerto Rican and a variety of other cultures and using those lessons as a springboard to create new art. This process mirrors the story of the role art has played in Lilly's own life story—as a student and teacher of world cultures through art. In the section called "Sala de clase/classroom" the visitor is invited to be a student of world cultures, for example, through the interactive (again using Flash animation) activity of building a traditional Puerto Rican vejigante mask.

Similarly, in Ruby C. Williams' site in the Folkvine.org Web site, the splash page is designed using meaningful materials from her world (her brightly painted signs) arranged around her produce stand situated in her yard. The use of bright, bold colors and asymmetrical placement of images reflects her aesthetic—and resonates with a larger African-American community taste. By transforming her produce stand into an art gallery, the story of Ruby's evolving identity as an artist who ministers through the "pulpit" of her produce stand and Walk-in Gallery is effectively conveyed.

In the Mims Web site, the sense of immersion is literally conveyed in baptism section of the virtual map. Murray (1997), in fact, characterizes immersion as "derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water" (Murray 1997: 71). Here visitors can elect to "enter the water" while viewing an archive photograph of an actual Indian River baptism. At the same time they hear the sound of water splashing and the words of a community elder narrating her memory of the experience. Immersion as a technique for ethnographic storytelling is the basis for other sections of the Mims Web site as well, including the presentation of hymn lining as part of the navigation of historic St. James Missionary Baptist Church. Visitors to this section of the Web site imitate the act of opening a hymn book to begin lining a hymn, and thereby learn about the tradition while experiencing it.

Other elements of effective ethnographic storytelling include: re-creating experiential moods, adding elements of surprise, reconstructing the experience through images, and providing closure. Reconstructing the mood of the experience can be particularly effective in folklore-oriented Web site design because it involves "showing rather than telling" what is happening, succinctly crystallizing experience, and giving the overall sense of the story or experience rather than rehashing the entire experience.

These aspects of ethnographic storytelling can be conveyed on the Internet through experimenting with the interactive and nonlinear characteristics of hypermedia (Richard Lanham 1993, Jeff Titon 1995). In particular Titon's assertion that "In hypertext, the reader is always offered multiple pathways through the information" (Titon 1995: 441), and Lanham's characterization of the personal computer as "a device of intrinsic dramaticality" (Lanham 1993: 6) provide designers of culturally-based Web sites with a fascinating opportunity to experiment with ideas regarding non-linear and interactive presentation styles as vehicles for conveying cultural information.

In Folkvine.org, this can be seen at the level of the individual artist sites and the splash page/visitors' center. Ginger LaVoie, a Polynesian quilt artist (although not biologically Polynesian), has a Web site where one is invited to "smooth and caress the quilt to navigate." The analogy of caressing becomes an organizing principle for her site. This, perhaps more effectively than any textual explanation, conveys the mood of Ginger's Polynesian quilt making.

In addition, at different points in the artists' Web sites visitors are also taken behind the scenes in an attempt to demonstrate what is happening and thereby re-create the ethnographic process. For example, in the Wayne and Marty Scott site (clown shoe makers from Howey-in-the-Hills, Florida), visitors can enter the Scott's workshop and see Folkvine team members (functioning as ethnographers/folklorists in this context) documenting the experience.

At the level of the site as a whole, the interactive tour guides (available in the virtual visitors' center) function as stand-in ethnographic guides to the material. By navigating Web sites through the tour guides (and the accompanying bobble-head commentary wherein members of the Folkvine.org team can comment on the site), visitors experience a virtually embedded folklore "script" that tells the story of folk artists and their communities according to interpretive themes such as re-creative identity. Reflections on the evolving nature of tradition are presented in a way that maintains visitors' interest and conveys abstract ideas concretely through succinct tour guide text, links to specific points in the individual Web sites to illustrate and "bobble-head commentary" (us talking) written and spoken in each of our "voices."

In addition, navigating "Lilly's house" within Lilly Carrasquillo's site on the Folkvine.org Web site offers a non-linear way to learn about the story of Lilly and the traditions on which her art draws through immersion. Exploring Lilly's house becomes a highly interactive and engaging way for the visitor to learn about the history, adaptation, and role of traditions such as Puerto Rican vejigante mask and Mexican ofrenda-making.

In the Mims Web site, non-linear storytelling is key to communicating the "story" of the citrus industry and Black education in this area. The orange grove section is designed as a spatial rather than temporal interface where visitors can learn about the history of the citrus industry in Mims by navigating the orange grove. Sweeping the mouse over different areas of an archive photo of grove workers, visitors can hear veteran citrus worker Buddy Wilson telling about shipping the fruit, see a recreation of the process of "firing the grove" to prevent a citrus freeze during cold nights, or learn how citrus workers "budded" a tree to increase its productivity.

A non-linear approach to storytelling was also the inspiration for creating the section about the "Clifton Colored School" on the Mims Web site. Through a recreation of the interior of the historic Black school built by early residents of Merritt Island in order to provide an education for their children, visitors can navigate the school house (including a painstaking recreation of the original bead board wood and location and placement of windows) and piece together the story of the school by visiting each desk to pick up another clue to the school's history.

Visitors can read historic newspaper articles about life at Clifton School, peruse a deed and historic map, and a family geneaology.

Mitchell and Charmaz (1998) also argue that effective ethnographic storytelling somehow involves providing closure (e above). There must be a sense of resolution, while also acknowledging that in certain ways the story is ongoing. In this area the digital environment reveals its uniqueness in relation to other mediums. As Titon (1995) argues: "hypertexts are unlike conventional books in important ways. They do not have the same kind of closure" (Titon 1995: 443). Similarly, Sarah Pink (2001) characterizes electronic texts as "permanently unfinished." Translating this characteristic into folklore-oriented Web design means using it to communicating the dynamic and ever-changing nature of tradition.

On Folkine, artists' "community pages" are periodically updated based on feedback received at public events and other celebrations connected to the life and work of the artists and their communities, such as Ruby C. Williams' annual Walk-in Gallery opening when she invites members of the community to a celebration of art, food, and good company. As these are posted and feedback is received and incorporated, the Web site develops further potential to meaningfully reflect the community taste and worldview of the artists and their communities.

In the Mims site, this concept of "permanent unfinishedness" provided the inspiration for the creation of the section on local Civil Rights leaders Harry and Harriette Moore. On the virtual map, visitors can click on an image of the Moore Park and learn about the Moores who once lived on that property. The story about the Moores that is known to the outside world is largely about their tragic murder on Christmas Eve in 1951 when their house was bombed. But focusing solely on that story fails to re-affirm the community's view of itself as dedicated to education and a strong Christian faith. Instead, this story is contextualized by having the Christian-themed "Ballad of Harry T. Moore" as the soundtrack and ending with the erection of the Moore Park on the same ground where their home once stood. The community, like the story, continues.

CONCLUSION

Designers of folklore-based Web sites have incredible potential to explore the use of digital media in conveying ethnographic experience and stories online in ways that move beyond a text-and-image model which privileges words as final arbiters of interpretation and meaning. The Folkvine and Mims Web sites are projects designed to utilize these new developments in ways that involve collaboration with artists and communities to more effectively tell their stories to a wider audience.

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