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Digital Storytelling and History Lines: Community Engagement in a Master-Planned Development

Helen Klaebe¹, Marcus Foth¹, Jean Burgess², Mark Bilandzic³,

¹ Institute for Creative Industries and Innovation, Queensland University of Technology,
Creative Industries Precinct, Musk Ave, Brisbane QLD 4059, Australia
h.klaebe, m.foth@qut.edu.au

² ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, Queensland University
of Technology, Creative Industries Precinct, Musk Ave, Brisbane QLD 4059, Australia
je.burgess@qut.edu.au

³ Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, 80539 München, Germany
markbilandzic@gmail.com

Abstract. The introduction of new media and information and communication technology enables a greater variety of formats and content beyond conventional texts in the application and discourse of public history projects. Multimedia and personalised content requires public historians and cultural community developers to grasp new skills and methods to make representations of and contributions to a collective community memory visible. This paper explores the challenge of broadening and reinvigorating the traditional role of the public historian working with communities via the facilitation, curation and mediation of digital content in order to foster creative expression in a residential urban development. It seeks to better understand the role of locally produced and locally relevant content, such as personal and community images and narratives, in the establishment of meaningful social networks of urban residents. The paper discusses the use of digital storytelling and outlines the development of a new community engagement application we call *History Lines*.

Keywords: public history; community engagement; digital storytelling; networked communities; master-planned communities; urban neighbourhoods; urban renewal; new media; creative expression.

1 Introduction

The Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV, www.kgurbanvillage.com.au, see Fig. 1) is a 16-hectare mixed-use urban renewal project situated within an inner-city suburb of Brisbane, Australia. The AUD 400 million project began in 1998 and is jointly developed by the Queensland Department of Housing and Queensland University of Technology (QUT) which expect it to be fully developed and occupied by 2010 at

which stage it will comprise more than 1000 residential units for more than 2000 residents.

Over the last two hundred years the land had been used as a meeting place for indigenous people, and become a home to both military and educational institutions that have helped shape Queensland's heritage. 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. Thus, in 2004, a multi-art form public history research project was devised [1]. It offered a range of possibilities for the telling of this history, while also increasing a sense of community by allowing individuals – through the use of traditional and new media narrative devices such as digital storytelling – to construct a personal sense of place, identity, and history within their emerging urban landscape. Klæbe's PhD examined new approaches to participatory public history using multi art form storytelling strategies, conducting the fieldwork at Kelvin Grove as part of the *Sharing Stories* history project (www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/sharing/) which was completed in December 2006.



Fig. 1. The Kelvin Grove Urban Village. © 2004 Kelvin Grove Urban Village Project.

In January 2006, the first residents of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village began to move in, making the vicinity an ideal location to conduct fieldwork about the emergence of a new community. In mid-2006, a multi-disciplinary group of researchers formed at QUT, with shared interests in the development and use of new media applications to engage emerging place-based communities. New media has the

potential to reconfigure traditional relationships between online and offline; public and private; local and global; and collective and networked. The research seeks to understand how exploiting opportunities for creative expression using new media tools might contribute to the co-creation of community and social capital in place-based contexts [2, 3]. To that end, the team is in the process of developing and testing a suite of community engagement tools, including digital storytelling and other vernacular forms of creative expression using new media technology [4-9]. In this paper, we discuss one established component of this suite of tools – Digital Storytelling; and one that is currently in development – *History Lines*.

2 Digital Storytelling

Background

The use of Digital Storytelling in the *Sharing Stories* project at the Kelvin Grove Urban Village represents an intersection between current developments in participatory new media on the one hand, and a ‘participatory turn’ in the practice of public history on the other. In a widespread sense, the introduction of user-friendly Web 2.0 applications is encouraging an increase in historical community civic engagement [8]. Public historians are increasingly embracing the digital age and proactively extending their range of skills and expertise. Frisch et al. say, ‘New digital tools and the rich landscape of practice they define may become powerful resources in restoring one of the original appeals of oral history – to open new dimensions of understanding and engagement through the broadly inclusive sharing and interrogation of memory’ [14]. The President of the International Oral History Association and newly appointed Professor of History at Monash University, Alistair Thomson, calls this current era of the oral history movement the *Fourth Paradigm* and says, ‘Throughout the past decade oral historians have been grappling with the technical, ethical, and epistemological implications of the digital revolution’ and concedes that this may not always fit comfortably with everyone in the history community’ [15]. But Robert Perks, Curator of Oral History at the British Library Sound Archive warns, ‘Web access is unstoppable and we [historians] ignore it at our peril’ [16].

The internet and new media applications are altering both the form and the content possible for historical discourse, with the processes of transmission arguably becoming less conventionally text-based, more visual, and increasingly personal. Additionally, visual life-stories are being explored as an appealing alternative to written narrative-based historical discourse. Lichtbau suggests, ‘The next generation of historians already work with cameras to tape their interviews; it is also necessary to design an audiovisual history curriculum so that they can acquire skills as audiovisual historians’ [12]. Allan suggests that new media are generating representational practices that are increasingly visual and offer an appealing alternative to non-visual, text-based historical discourse: ‘The Internet, television, and satellite are inflecting

the articulation of collective history and the form of historical consciousness within our communities' [13]. The challenge for public historians is to develop and effectively exploit platforms and tools in order to maximize the opportunities afforded by these new media technologies and forms. One such platform for participatory public history is Digital Storytelling.

Digital Storytelling in the *Sharing Stories* Project

Situated within the context of these changes in both media participation and the practice of public history, our research in the *Sharing Stories* project investigated the potential of digital storytelling to constitute a form of history production that adds value beyond that of the traditional aural or video oral history interview by maximising direct participation.

The term digital storytelling is extremely multivalent, referring variously to hypertext fiction, computer game narratives, and various artist-led forms of narrative presentation using multimedia and the Internet. For the purposes of this paper, we refer to a specific tradition based around the production of digital stories in intensive collaborative workshops. The outcome is a short autobiographical narrative recorded as a voiceover, combined with photographic images (often sourced from the participants' own photo albums) and sometimes music (or other sonic ambience). These textual elements are combined to produce a 2-3 minute video. This form of digital storytelling originated in the late 1990s at the University of California at Berkeley's Centre for Digital Storytelling (www.storycenter.org), headed by Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert [5]. In 2001, UK academic and social documentary photographer Daniel Meadows established the BBC's *Capturing Wales* digital storytelling project after he was introduced to the form at Berkeley. Following a period of mentoring by Meadows, QUT Creative Industries research has included elements of digital storytelling in several applied research projects since 2003 [9-11].

Common to all branches of this tradition is an ethic of participation: one of the core aims is to provide people who are not necessarily expert users with an opportunity to produce an aesthetically coherent and interesting broadcast quality work that communicates effectively with a wider, public audience. In comparison to 'Web 2.0' platforms for 'amateur' creativity like YouTube or Flickr which rely on autonomous participation and peer learning rather than 'top-down' training, digital storytelling works to broaden participation by articulating everyday vernacular experiences and practices (such as oral storytelling) with professional expertise and institutional support.

In the *Sharing Stories* project[1], a collection of 18 digital stories was produced in two workshops as part of the larger project, which also included traditional oral history activities, resulting in a book, a website, and artworks. The digital stories were published on the *Sharing Stories* website, where they attracted significantly higher frequencies of visitors than the other creative content. The application of digital storytelling for this context resulted in a focus on facilitating public participation and the effective remediation of personal history as public history, backgrounding issues of ICT literacies and the technical aspects of digital production [7]. Methodologically, the digital storytelling workshops functioned both as practical experiments – in

innovative forms of public history production, and a site of ethnographic research for Klæbe and Burgess. Klæbe particularly focused on whether new media techniques, such as digital storytelling, could be successfully employed to remember personal experiences in relation to a community public history project. Burgess, who also facilitated on the *Sharing Stories* project, used the digital storytelling workshops as opportunities to investigate the affordances of digital storytelling as an effective remediation of ‘vernacular creativity’ in the service of cultural citizenship, particularly for older, less computer-literate people [6, 8].



Fig. 2. Participants in a *Sharing Stories* digital storytelling workshop.

A professional approach to public history was an essential element of the project as a whole, including thorough background research of the historical theme being undertaken at the outset. In the case of the *Sharing Stories* project, where many outputs were planned to accompany a book publication [18], this research could be repurposed as content for new media applications, including the website, visual art and digital stories. The accuracy and depth of the historical information gathered enriched and enlivened the usage of new media applications in a meaningful way; the new media applications were not ‘tacked on’ or treated as novelties, but rather integrated into a multi-layered approach that, it was hoped, would engage different audiences in specific ways and on multiple levels.

Summary of Project Outcomes

The digital stories produced for the project primarily took the shape of anecdotal reminiscences – about childhoods, work experiences, or military service in the area.

Taken as a body of work, the stories re-mediate 'public' history in subtle, associative ways: they connect representations of storytellers' present 'selves' with personal memories of the past, even while focusing on a 'public' place and major public events such as WWII. 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 an objective appraisal of the past. No one disputes that oral histories can contain distorted and subjective accounts of history. But, as used in anthropology, Thomson says, 'A single story can be illuminating, deep, and rich, and can be helpful for developing a hypothesis to take to other stories' [15]. Audiovisual presentations seem to resonate with public audiences and are popular with sponsors, who are often local or state government bodies. Lichtblau believes this is because, 'Film makes it easier to communicate our interview-related research than purely audio sources. The reason for that is quite obvious. Audiences are not accustomed to only listening to edited or unedited audio sources; they are used to watching documentary films' [12]. Digital storytelling works in the same way, as it is simply another audiovisual format that can enhance public history.

Based on feedback from the participants, it appears the workshops may have had additional, albeit unexpected therapeutic outcomes. This phenomenon was also marked in Kidd's research on the *Capture Wales* program [19]. Kidd found the workshops had great 'side benefits', for the participants on a personal level. Similar testimonies were documented at Kelvin Grove [1, 7]. One participant, who lives in a local retirement home, said the staff and other residents treated her differently after her story screened at a public exhibition. At the retirement village she received admiring comments like 'make way for the movie star' as she passed through the common areas. Even her own children, who do not live nearby, were subsequently prompted to read the diaries she had kept since she was in her teens for the first time, after her story became accessible on the project website. One of Kidd's participants 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' [19].

Lessons from the *Sharing Stories* Project

The findings to date reveal two major concerns for the public historian / facilitator to consider when using new media applications such as digital storytelling in public history projects. They are: intellectual property, copyright and ethical issues; and consideration of the workshop technique used (the process of scripting the story or using interviews) in regards to collective and individual identity.

Intellectual Property, Copyright and Ethics

The facilitator's role in any public history project is to produce engaging community outcomes, while also protecting the interests of all participants. In particular, it is an ethical imperative to ensure the participants understand the ways in which the information they contribute will be 'published'. In the case of an oral history

transcript, this is fairly straightforward. But in the increasingly complex digital and multimedia environment it becomes more problematic to ensure participants – particularly older participants – have an accurate understanding of the conditions under which their story will be made publicly available. Nancy MacKay refers to this issue as one of ‘the big questions’ for oral historians as they increasingly curate collections for the web [17]. Perks recently quoted the findings of a UK study into web accessible collections that concluded by, ‘calling for improved awareness of copyright and ethical issues amongst web creators whilst noting that the worst transgressors of best practice appeared to be community oral history groups, perhaps through ignorance, perhaps because copyright and consent wasn’t considered to be an issue where the interviewees themselves created the site’ [16].

The interlocking copyright and ethical issues become more challenging in the case of digital storytelling, for two main reasons. First, the participants in some sense must be considered to be *authors*, and not only contributors, to the resultant cultural product. Second, the visual and aural narrative representation of a digital story (e.g. photographs of a relative who died in tragic circumstances) can produce very powerful emotional responses – not only for the storyteller, but also for their family and friends, requiring additional sensitivity. How does one easily explain to an eighty-six year old (the age of one of the participants of our 2004 digital storytelling workshop), what it means to be ‘available on the web’, when he or she does not own a computer? At the very least, it is essential that facilitators take the time to explain the process in detail with every participant – this may include accessing other examples of digital stories by similar aged individuals online with the participant. During the *Sharing Stories* project, we accomplished this by demonstrating and navigating the BBC *Capturing Wales* site alongside the participants, because a large cross-section of age and gender demographics are represented on this site, allowing participants to search and watch stories created by similar-aged participants in Wales.

Care can also be taken to ensure that the use of the material is limited (in most circumstances) to the project for which it was created, and that each participant retains the individual copyright of their stories and the right to change their mind about its end use. Some projects use the *Creative Commons* (CC) licensing system to maximize flexibility in use while preserving the intellectual property rights of individual participants.

The boilerplate licenses available under *Creative Commons*, which are explained clearly in lay language, make this process simple and efficient, without requiring extensive legal knowledge on the part of the copyright holder. The Australian versions of the Creative Commons licenses had not been finalized at the project’s inception in 2004, so in order to achieve similar outcomes, it was necessary for the *Sharing Stories* project to devise specific intellectual property and copyright agreements based on the principles of *Creative Commons*, and this proved to be a long, arduous task. Now, however, community history groups seeking to employ new media applications in Australia have the opportunity to use the *Creative Commons* licenses, reducing the legal and logistical burden of flexible copyright arrangements significantly.

Adapting the Workshop Method

The model of digital storytelling that we adapted for use in this project focuses on empowering participants by teaching the skills required that would enable them to produce their own digital stories. The participants attend an intensive computer-based workshop over several days, so they can learn the new media skills required to achieve this. The advantage of this approach is that participants become content creators, as they are taken on a journey to create a short film, while also concurrently gaining substantial technological up-skilling and knowledge transfer. In the first *Sharing Stories* workshop, participants were taught how to edit their images and video using computer software like *Adobe Photoshop* and *Adobe Premiere*. This approach proved to not be wholly inclusive as originally envisaged, as many community members had parenting or work (paid or voluntary) commitments that prevented them from partaking in all parts of the workshop. Additionally, it quickly became apparent that the participants' primary goal in participating in the workshop was to contribute to a public history project rather than to 'express' themselves or to share their life experiences. While the participants enthusiastically participated in the workshop at a social level, they did not represent themselves as being especially interested in becoming filmmakers or digital creative producers. This was incorporated into the ongoing research project as a major finding, transforming the approach taken in the second phase.

In the second *Sharing Stories* workshop, an attempt was made to address these issues by reducing the workshop time significantly. This time, participants attended the storytelling sessions, then prepared their script and photographs in one-on-one sessions with a facilitator, recorded their audio track, and then handed over the final media production to the production team. Participants were shown their near-complete stories and then had an opportunity to make any changes, if they wished. The production team also made their availability as flexible as possible for participants, and in one instance, where the participant was a full-time carer of her husband and unable to leave her home for extended periods, the researchers conducted the workshop with her in her home. The stories created in the second workshop proved to be just as empowering for the storytellers as the first, but without any accompanying intervention into 'digital divide' issues or attempts to build computer literacy.

Physical and educational barriers prevented some participants from writing a script for their digital story. In the second workshop, we trialed the use of edited oral history interviews in some instances to create the two-minute audio track required, while still attempting to adhere to the same storytelling principles as the scripted digital stories. Both methods used were successful in allowing a diverse cross-section of people to participate, no matter what their circumstances were, while maximizing the opportunities for the enthusiastic sharing and comparing of historical information and memories.

History Lines

Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world in terms of the high proportion of urban dwellers among its total population. Approximately two-thirds of the total population reside in major cities [20]. Current projections for South East Queensland are 3.71m residents by 2026, an increase of around 1.05m people, or almost 50,000 each year on average [21]. Where are they coming from? What are the histories they bring with them? Mapping the migrational churn of residential communities is of great importance to urban planners, developers, and policy makers alike, as together they try to forecast the economic, environmental and social footprints they leave as they move and migrate within and between cities, regions, states and countries.

The master plan of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village calls for research and development of appropriate systems that can run on the information and communication technology infrastructure that has been installed [22]. The aim is to provide an online mechanism linking the people and businesses that ‘live, learn, work and play’ here. Responding to this call, the *History Lines* component (Fig. 2) is part of our suite of new media tools we are developing to help us explore the use of narrative and new media in community engagement and urban planning processes. *History Lines* uses a custom-designed Google Maps interface to illustrate residential history and migrational churn. It brings a cross section of new residents together to trace and map where they have lived in the course of their lives. When the longitude and latitude coordinates are collated and augmented with short personal narratives, overlapping and common lines become visible. The stories at these intersections in time and space stimulate interest and offer opportunities for further personalised networking [23].



Fig. 3. History lines of the participants of a Kelvin Grove Urban Village workshop.

As a community driven service, *History Lines* encourages people to participate in the content creation process. We employ recent Web 2.0 technology to provide a sophisticated, intuitive web based framework that allows individual residents of the KGUV to become authors and publish their personal history to a shared online community database. More specifically, we have created a custom-designed, content management framework for KGUV residents to digitalise their history by tagging places where they have lived in the past and attaching comments, multimedia content and contact details. In order to provide an instinctive and user-friendly interface for the data input, we use a Mashup application with the Google Maps API, so people can directly pinpoint places where they have lived in the past. Abstracting from technical implementation issues, a geocoding algorithm translates the selected places into longitude / latitude coordinates for later retrieval and visualisation purposes.

The frontend of *History Lines* displays all submitted information of the community on a GoogleMap using color and size coded pins according to the different activities of people or to highlight where their paths have crossed. Various dynamic filtering functions enable users to specify which data will be displayed on the map after each request. Those include selection of data that only belong to a certain group of people (e.g., 'my friends', 'KGUV workshop') or data that refer to a certain time period or to particular regions of the world. An AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML) enabled search mechanism allows the filter functions to be applied on the fly which keeps the response times of each database request low and provides a much more user friendly interface than classic web applications do. As the embedded search engine is

based on the folksonomy concept, a user based taxonomy, where each entry is described by a number of tags, allows *History Lines* to leverage the collective intelligence of its users and to categorise the content and facilitate effective search functions in the system.

We see *History Lines* as an experiment to test how urban computing can be used to facilitate a social network of storytelling, themed around community history and place making. *History Lines* is a concept that allows individuals to leave their own 'historical footprint' online and connect with others who they 'cross paths with'. By leaving narrative notes about the places contributors have visited using the categories: *Live, Work, Play* and *Study*, others can connect and use the information to lessen the anxiety of their own transition from one community to another. The contributors are also able to visually see connections between their lines and those drawn by other residents and contact them if they wish with commonality to draw from.

While still in early development, *History Lines* has the potential to visually represent common themes using historical narrative, so as to foster a better understanding of our neighbours collectively and of our community members individually. *History Lines* is thus an experiment to translate the 'six degrees of separation' theory [24] underlying global social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook for local community engagement in a master-planned community site.

Conclusion

New media methods such as digital storytelling allow public and community organisations to engage their communities by promoting opportunities for community members to share their narratives in a 'glocal' [25] context. Our research indicates that digital storytelling compliments traditional oral and archival approaches to history and encourages broad inclusive participation and interest within a local community and beyond.

Digital storytelling is an effective use of new media when thoughtfully integrated into a multi-faceted public history project. If care is taken by the public historian to ensure the process is a positive experience for participants, then we agree with Daniel Meadows who believes digital stories help to reveal the 'invisible nation' and says, 'Photographs which until now have been tucked into drawers and cupboards or taped into scrapbooks and family albums, come out of the shadows, sparking memory, striking a light on the screen' [26]. There is certainly little doubt digital storytelling can be a powerfully affective amplification of traditional oral history interviewing, and one that can be easily accessible, exhibitable and can offer an engaging insight into our collective social history.

Based on our research so far, we argue that effectively mediated historical narratives can contribute to identity, authenticity and belonging. Local narratives can restore, unite or create community through the merging of personal memory with pedagogical commemoration to the point where past experiences permeate the fabric of everyday contemporary life [13]. History is continuously being adapted and re-remembered and new media applications can be used to transcend age gaps and engage broader audiences. Digital storytelling – and perhaps soon *History Lines* – will

prove to be two more of many new media tools likely to be included in public history and community engagement projects conducted by practitioners in an increasingly multimedia environment.

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