Serious Storytelling
Serious Digital Storytelling

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ABSTRACT

Storytelling has a lengthy old tradition, and the reasons why stories have been told are manifold: for entertainment, to transfer knowledge between generations, to keep cultural heritage, or as warnings for others. The emergence of digitalization of media brought many new possibilities to tell stories – also in serious and non-entertainment contexts. Serious gaming, thus gaming without an entertainment purpose, is just one simple example. Within the scope of this paper, we introduce the term *serious storytelling* as a new potential media genre – serious storytelling, thus storytelling without entertainment purpose.

Keywords

Serious games; serious storytelling; digital narratives; eLearning, persuasive messages;

INTRODUCTION

In *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, Stephen Denning describes how he applies storytelling to market his projects. He describes, how he failed in doing so, due to a lack of emotional component. His superiors related to his project ideas rather poorly, when he presented raw data, and facts. Thus by adding storytelling, creating a personal relation to his ideas and potential projects, he could convince his superiors and obtain successfully funding for his initiatives [4]. Stating it more simple: "emotion is the fast line to the brain" [23], also in serious contexts.

Serious games, thus computer games "with a day job" (as the consulting company Gartner referred it to) already demonstrate how computer games can be utilized "for a primary purpose other than entertainment" [26]. Within the scope of this paper, we try to generalize the idea of serious games, or persuasion on a more general level, by introducing the field of *serious storytelling*.

The impact of the seriousness of storytelling has already been part of many discussions in the past, and has led to many controversies e.g. in literacy works. One example is the *Divine Comedy* [1] written by Dante Alighieri, whose allegories, thus alternative and differently interpretable meanings [26] let do controversies in the past. This has been depicted in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the*

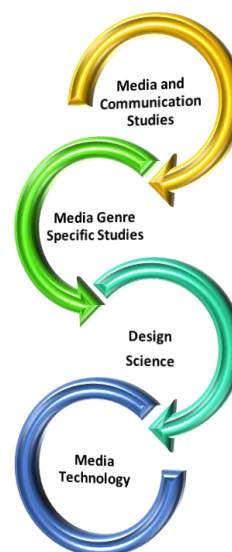*Rose* [8], where Dante's book became the center of religious discussion.

Figure 1: Theoretical Fields with a Potential Impact on Serious Storytelling
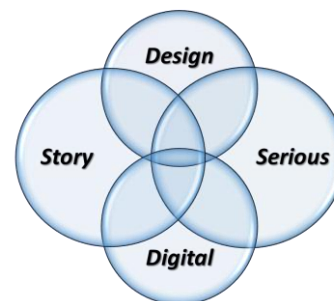

Figure 2: Digital Serious Storytelling Relating Design, Story, Seriousness in the Digital Domain

Nevertheless, also outside literacy there are a few examples for serious storytelling: persuasive marketing, storytelling in change management, eLearning, or serious games are just a few examples. However, it's clear, that many theories will need to be investigated (see Figure 1) to understand the

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notion of serious storytelling. However, in today's digital world, the notion of design, serious, story, and digital will have impact how serious storytelling will be evolving.

RELATED WORK

It's obvious that other theories in mass communication and mass media as e.g. McLuhan [18], Laswell, or Neumann (see [19]) will have impact on the notion of *serious storytelling*. Story telling aspects in narratives, and virtual narratives, as e.g. invested by Campbell [3] or Ryan [21] have impact on serious storytelling as well. In particular in the digital world, theories emerging from the field of digital media as e.g. Manovich [16] or Samsel [22] are a good starting point to investigate the basic theories to conclude to new. In the field of persuasive (serious) games e.g. [25] who extended his theory from Caillois (Play), or Albarracin (Attention). A framework for storytelling in interactive TV has been developed in [12]. A new media form, *ambient media* has been introduced in e.g. [13] and [11].

WHAT IS SERIOUS STORYTELLING?

Storytelling

In principle we can understand a narration as "a fundamental way that humans make sense of the world". It takes place in time, space, and represents a "chain of events in a cause-effect relationship" [2]. In short, a narration means causality-effect – space – time. Following D. Bordwell's definition, a narration is told through a plot, presenting the story visually and audibly, nevertheless also presenting non-diegetic elements (e.g. credits in a motion picture). D. Bordwell, nicely defines the model in the context of motion pictures, where he emphasizes, that a story in principle is the sum of human inferred (thus interpreted) events and the rendered human perceptible events of the story. Where D. Bordwell described this for the medium motion pictures, this separation will gain importance in particular in *serious storytelling* and will be discussed within the scope of the next section.

Storytelling + Serious

Extending D. Bordwell's definitions of narration for motion pictures, *serious storytelling* deals with a narration in a particular serious application context outside the entertainment area, as e.g. eLearning. The narration is grounded in this context, application boundaries, and underlays its fundamental context rules. To state an example, in eLearning environments, the context of learning is defined by pedagogy, learning experience, design learning, transfer of knowledge, and the space where these actions are taking place.

D. Bordwell's notion of story and plot can be generalized to content, thus content represents the plot consisting of explicit and non-diegetic materials. It's important to extend D. Bordwell's basic idea, as he solely focuses on motion pictures, however, *serious storytelling* is not solely focusing on this genre, thus requires a more general approach. In the

domain of eLearning, content is compiled of the complete learning experience, thus includes teacher-student discussions in online forums, as well as student-student discussions. Thus the learning experience does not solely consist of the learning material presented by the teacher, but also by additional, non-diegetic materials created throughout the learning process.

A narration is told as a network of cause-effect events that are taking place within the particular serious application context, that are evolving in time. Thus *serious storytelling* requires re-defining the idea of the story and plot, as the narration is a sum of story and plot, including non-diegetic materials, and how a person infers and interprets the story. As the space where the narration takes place extends from the place where the actual plot is rendered, in *serious storytelling* we can speak of the course of the narration, rather than a plot. In eLearning, the course of the narration is a sum of cause-effect events, that are based on manifold events stipulated to create a learning experience.

Definition: *Serious Storytelling*

Storytelling outside the entertainment context, where the narration as artefact is impressive in quality and relates to a matter of importance and seriousness.

To conclude, let's define *serious* as something that is "thoughtful", "impressive in quality", and "relates to a matter of importance" to be able to define *serious storytelling* as a new idea [20]. We also should consider, that the term storytelling, might be sloppy, and the term *serious narrative* would fit better. However, at this state we shall remain with the more sloppy definition.

THE 4 "CS" IN SERIOUS STORYTELLING

Let us next consider what the components of a serious story could be.
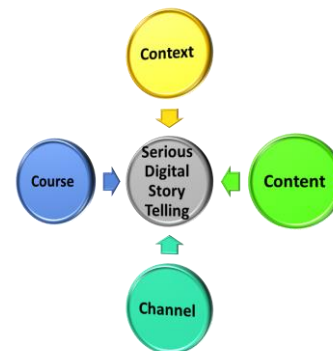

Figure 2: Digital Serious Storytelling Relating Design, Story, Seriousness in the Digital Domain

We can see four components that are essential to serious storytelling from a media study viewpoint:

- **Context:** situation, space, place, application context, and particular context related modalities are where the narrative is taking place (e.g. TV, advertising, sports, household, festivals, learning, urban environments, learning etc.);

- **Course:** sum of plot (explicit, and non-diegetic events), in addition audience interpreted and inferred events of D. Bordwell's model of narrative - how content is evolving in a cause-effect relationship as part of the application context, and content; as well as how the audience interacts with content, as represented by a narrative cube described in [XXX], and depicted in Figure 3.

- **Content:** the actual content of the narrative, thus the human perceptive components of the plot of the narration expressed through various elements from media genres, as e.g. film language, natural language, literature, or ubiquitous media objects;

- **Channel:** in difference to other type of media (however, not all types of media), media channels gain importance, as *serious storytelling* can happen across various distribution channels, or channels where media objects can be perceived;

Serious storytelling will be also about the three components of narration, interaction, and content and their relation to each other in time and space. A model for the relation between these components in time and space has been presented in [12] with the development of the narrative cube. It will be an absolute necessity in creating a new theory based on these old theories, to define the notion of serious storytelling. Thus to follow up with the following questions, is a necessity:

- What is context, course, content, and channel in the context of serious storytelling?

- What is the notion of time and space, and how does it differ from previous understanding?

- In which way can the narrative cube be adapted, and which features do serious stories have in its relation?

POTENTIALS AND APPLICATION SCENARIOS
A few possible application areas, where serious storytelling could be applied are:

- eLearning
- eLeadership
- eDesign
- eCreativity
- B2B storytelling
- Qualitative journalism
- Simulations & virtual training

- Serious digital games
- Communication in social networks
- …

Quality Journalism
Traditional journalism, and quality in journalism is a long-lasting discussion. In the field of mass communication and mass media, we can consider high level quality journalism as serious storytelling. With the trend towards user contributed content, we can extend the notion of quality journalism towards the consumer as content editor and collaborator, which has been investigated within the following EU project: [27].

Serious (Persuasive) Computer Games
A prime example for serious storytelling are serious games. Serious games are games for a non-entertainment purpose and shall allow the creation of knowledge and wisdom. In the context of marketing this has been investigated under the umbrella of serious persuasive games [25]. The excellent work of [25] furthermore, developed and investigated scenarios in the context of energy conservation and sustainability as one example for serious (persuasive) computer games.

Computer Graphic based Forensics
A very serious example is forensics, which is an excellent example for serious storytelling per-se. Court cases requiring audio-visual materials to make the happenings on crime scenes visible are a serious matter, and require quality, reality closeness, as well as a non-fiction standpoint to guarantee fair court rulings (see e.g. [17]).

Smart Environments
Smart environments, thus environments such as smart cars, smart home entertainment systems, smart fridges, location based mobile services, etc. provide more and more possibilities to render media content in serious contexts. These environments are referred to as ubiquitous media, pervasive media, or ambient media [9–11]. These environment provide the medium for telling serious stories in real-world settings. A more concrete example are public screens at bus stops, restaurants, or other locations, which are providing context information linked to the particular location [14].

Simulations & Virtual Trainings
Virtual training environments and simulations, where professionals are trained in simulated environments are another good example for serious storytelling. As e.g. investigated in [28] and [15], where a virtual safety training system for a refinery has been developed.

eLearning
For eLearning, crafting a digital story within a given context provides one of the most relevant learning experiences. This has been investigated in [7], which

applied digital storytelling in the context of HIV and AIDS education [6].

Ethics and Religion
The serious storytelling approach can also be utilized as an asset for interfaith dialogue, as e.g. discussed in [24]. The approach is based on narratives of faith, i.e. stories of ordinary life, as interpreted from the viewpoint of an existential experience.

eLeadership and Management
At the time of strategic top-down leadership, it's not easy to get hold on grass root level information, which would reveal weak signals of given organizational status. Informal stories can be loosely analyzed and filtered to give the leadership a true image of organization.

CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION
The aim of this publication was to give birth to a new idea in the world of digital storytelling. It was a first elaboration and first discussion which potential use-cases are emerging, and how this new paradigm might lead to re-thinking traditional storytelling. There is still much re-shaping and discussion needed to more clearly define the notion of *serious storytelling,* as well as to discuss weather serious storytelling actually is a new way to tell stories. However, the described application scenarios are rather complete, and demonstrate the need to define serious storytelling as a new way to tell stories. Thus, in our future work, we are going to elaborate the notion of serious storytelling further, try to develop theory, and discuss these in relation to other scholars' work. From the application context, we definitely see serious storytelling as a newly emerging field. We would like to close with a statement from [5]: "Plato identified poets and storytellers as dangerous fellows who put unreliable knowledge into the heads of children" – serious storytelling is about the transfer of knowledge and wisdom and will enrich the world of media by a completely different way in telling narratives.

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