
Third Edition
Digital
Storytelling
A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment
Carolyn Handler Miller

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A creator's guide to interactive entertainment

Third Edition

Carolyn Handler Miller

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This edition of Digital Storytelling is dedicated to my husband, for his unwavering and cheerful support …

And in memory of my mother, who always enjoyed a good story, no matter how told.

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Foreword

Digital storytelling. In its true essence, it is so much more than simply "writing for the Web." The secret to any degree of long-term "success" lies with storytelling and attracting and then engaging a captive audience in a digital space where banner ads, clicks, pokes, cat videos, and a host of other distractions are rife is no mean feat.

Crafted in a way that only a great storyteller might, *Digital Storytelling* is delivered in a cohesive arc of five parts as Carolyn Handler Miller takes you by the hand and walks and talks you through new technologies and the creative opportunities that they bring for writers and creators, pausing to consider convergence, interactivity (and most importantly its effects), and digital storytelling tools. Vital topics are finely balanced, not focusing too intently on the digital and choosing instead to bring core fundamentals of storytelling to your toolbox. Characters, dialogue and emotion, story structure, and a laser focus on your audience and their behaviors are woven throughout this third edition of *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*. Carolyn expertly takes a close look at dovetailing digital techniques with storytelling principles and how they apply to video games, online, mobile and apps, ARG, TV, toys, and immersive environments, concluding with the much puzzled upon question of career considerations and finding *paid* work as a digital storyteller.

Which is perhaps where I come in …

In 2006 I was a bestselling novelist, having penned three "rom coms," and had begun to flex my playwriting muscles too. My first three novels were written with a "promise" that I'd made to myself. In an era where Bridget Jones was klutzing through life, documenting her calorie and nicotine intake and where romantic comedy and chick lit were being constantly dumbed down, I made a deal with myself.

Each of my books would organically weave three things:

1. a foreign destination;
2. an art form; and
3. a genre of music.

And so *Class Act*, *Look Before You Leap*, and *Three of a Kind* were set in dual locations and took readers from Paris to Valencia, Dublin to Lisbon, set against a backdrop of classical, jazz, and blues with a splash of additional color courtesy of Edgar Degas and his ballerinas. I was frustrated as I yearned for these stories to live and breathe beyond their book jackets. I imagined readers *listening* to *Canon in D* whilst reading the slower paced scenes. I wanted

a postcard print of Degas ballerinas, with their pastel blue tutus, inside my front cover. But this was 2004 and the only way this would happen would be with a clunky CD in a sleeve inside the back cover. A "multimedia" add-on.

Disillusioned with the confines of restricting my characters and their stories within the jacket of a book I also realized that I was one in a stable of similar writers. Our books were simultaneously hitting the shelves, I had a series of uncomfortable photo shoots in shop windows (once holding a book in one hand and a yogurt in the other—don't ask), and was gracing the sofas of breakfast and afternoon shows for interviews, not so much about the books, but more about the female-centric (and sometimes comedic) themes within them.

My publisher wanted me to keep doing the same thing.

I didn't.

I focused on playwriting and showcasing my plays was my first experience of audience reactions to my storytelling, in real time. It was pivotal, shocking, and hugely exciting. That dialogue and those scenes I'd expected them to bust their sides laughing at? They merely tittered … The poignant relationship-split scene that I'd cried over as I wrote? They barely sniffed. And a couple of people blew their nose, loudly. But nobody bawled. At least not like I did. I had a lot to learn—about writing for performance and connecting with my audience. Disillusioned with the limited scope for my writing, the range for reaching out to, interacting with, and engaging an audience was stifling and so I turned to the Internet, specifically to Google …

Ironically, although probably not surprisingly, I first met Carolyn digitally, six months later. The disillusionment had led me to enroll as a full-time student on a Master's Program teaching Creative Writing & New Media. As a guest lecturer, Carolyn immediately captivated us with her knowledge, processes, awareness of fluidity and yet focus when writing to entertain an audience that were so blinkered to "traditional" or "old" media. Within an hour of "meeting" and asking her a barrage of questions I'd clicked to buy the first edition of *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*.

And yet it was only the beginning. At the very least, of a friendship between Carolyn and I.

A further year later, under the direction of my mentor Christy Dena, Ph.D. and with a (now embarrassing) amount of emails to both Christy and Carolyn, my fourth novel had fragmented and was living and breathing online through a series of blogs, YouTube videos, *Second Life* meet-ups, email interactions, fictitious magazine articles, spoof magazine covers, postcards sent to readers around the world, and forums. Within days agents, newspapers, magazines, production companies, and networks were pinging my inbox and calling my phone. It was clear I was on to something. Tim O'Reilly's "Tools of Change in Publishing Conference" whisked me to New York to present my project and publishers, broadcasters, and filmmakers around the world invited me to talk to their storytellers.

It was the ultimate baptism of fire and whilst it sometimes burned, I mostly glowed with excitement and opportunity.

Digital storytelling has been the cause of excitement, debate, and discussion for a while, bandied around under broader terminology such as pervasive storytelling, transmedia storytelling,

and storytelling 2.0, brings forth animated discussions of narrative design, experience design, engagement, and interaction, and is the topic of conversation for many conferences that focus on entertainment and all things "new."

I now work with storytellers and producers across a global entertainment industry, with a close-knit community of great people with awesome job titles, and on my travels, my time as Producer and Chair of StoryWorld Conference, teaching at film and media schools, and conversations with renowned Hollywood storytellers and consultants, there remains one statement that rings loud and clear: "there just aren't enough writers who know how to *really* do this."

There are plenty of strategists, architects, and theorists—but never enough writers who *really* understand the complexities of digital storytelling—the interactions, pacing, calls to action, storylines. Somewhere amongst the bells and whistles, human behaviors tend to be forgotten and many are the novice storytellers who believed they can *make* their audiences behave differently.

If this book serves only to make you do one thing—let it be to write.

To experiment, to understand your audience, to prototype, to strategize, but to write and "get it out there."

In balance to there being "not enough writers who know how to *really* do this" there is also a huge opportunity for experimentation—which brings experience, failure, and then growth.

If there's one thing I learned from my Master's story project, it's that I learned more from what went wrong than what went right. That's where the learning is—in the experimentation. Storytelling is intrinsic to our DNA and at many a conference I've heard an "expert" preach about the days of cave painting and campfire oratory tales. We know this. What we're still trying to catch up with is how to turn our storytelling ship and navigate digital whilst keeping tight with our audience, weaving entry points, jump-off points, and opportunities for interactivity—all whilst retaining exemplary fundamentals of storytelling.

I am absolutely honored and delighted to be writing this foreword for Carolyn's third edition of *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment*.

So, at the risk of repeating myself …

Digital storytelling. In its true essence, it is so much more than simply "writing for the Web." The secret to any degree of long-term "success" lies with storytelling and attracting and then engaging a captive audience in a digital space where banner ads, clicks, pokes, cat videos, and a host of other distractions are rife is no mean feat.

Because without "story" it's all just noise and here's where Carolyn truly excels.

Alison Norrington
CEO
storycentral

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Preface

THE EVOLVING WORLD OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Since the second edition of this book came out, back in 2008, a staggering number of new developments and innovations have taken place in this field. I cannot think of one area of digital media where tremendous change has not occurred. Furthermore, whole new areas of content have been created where virtually nothing existed in 2008. These include storytelling on smart phones and tablets; new forms of interactive TV, like second-screen and social TV; the huge wave of popularity of social media, which is turning into a viable platform to tell stories; and the growth of transmedia storytelling. New digital platforms and technologies have also been introduced, such as Google Glass and the Kinect. In this new edition, I have done my best to include all major new developments in this arena as clearly and completely as possible.

As in the two earlier editions, the focus here is on storytelling, not on the technology. I have discussed the technology only to the degree that such a discussion can be used to clarify how a particular technology can be used for storytelling purposes. I leave it to others to delve deeply into the technological aspects of this field. While I fully acknowledge that the technology is extremely important, it is not only beyond the scope of this book, but it is also, to be honest, beyond my expertise. I have instead focused on the areas where I do have a certain expertise, which is in storytelling and in creating interactive digital media projects. Thus, I have covered storytelling essentials: character development, plot, emotion, and structure. And I have also focused on the impact of interactivity on narrative, and the way it can change everything about classic storytelling.

One interesting observation I made in preparing this new edition is the fact that many recent projects defy neat categorization. For example, a single project may be a work of transmedia storytelling, and simultaneously be a work of social media, an interactive experience for the Web, and a new form of gaming. It is becoming increasingly challenging to slot projects into specific chapters. Perhaps we are looking towards a world where all forms of digital media will be multi-platform. If multi-platform stories become the norm, labeling them by the platform they live on will no longer make sense. The one thing we can count on is that significant changes will continue to take place in this field. While some may be predictable, many will not be.

THE VARIOUS DEFINITIONS OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

It should be noted that people use a variety of definitions for "digital storytelling." The way we use it in this book is this: digital storytelling is the use of digital media platforms and interactivity for narrative purposes, either for fictional or for non-fiction stories. Under this definition, we include everything from video games to smart toys to virtual reality, and a number of other story forms as well.

Quite often the projects highlighted in his book have been produced by a professional team, and with the expectation that the work would be seen by a large audience and in the hopes that there would be some financial compensation for producing it. While a great many of these works are made for entertainment purposes, others are made to train, to promote, to educate, and to inform. But even when employed for pragmatic purposes, these works always contain elements of storytelling.

In the educational arena, however, "digital storytelling" is used to mean the employment of still images and a recorded script, and possibly some video or animation, to tell personal stories or stories relating to an element in the curriculum. Often children are given the opportunity to create these stories to teach them narrative skills and to excite them about learning. In the anthropological field, "digital storytelling" is used as a way to preserve stories of a culture or historic period that might otherwise be forgotten.

In journalism, the term is used to indicate a true story that is told via multiple media, such as audio, text, video, and still images. In the last several years, we have seen a significant growth in interactive documentaries, and some of these have been made for prestigious institutions like the *New York Times* and the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

Although these definitions and intentions differ, they all do have some critical elements in common: they are narratives, they employ digital media, and they are meant to be engaging.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS EDITION

This edition is organized much like the second edition, although some new chapters have been added, and several chapters have been merged. Nevertheless, the five large divisions used in the second edition have been retained here. They include:

- PART 1: NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES

  This section covers the history and development of digital storytelling, and also examines what is meant by convergence and how it relates to digital storytelling.

- PART 2: CREATING STORY-RICH PROJECTS

  This section examines the fundamentals of storytelling (such as plots, character development, emotional content, and structure) and how they are impacted by interactivity. It also investigates important developmental considerations like one's

audience; the use of social media and transmedia; and the steps that one can take to make the production process as smooth as possible.

- PART 3: HARNESSING DIGITAL STORYTELLING FOR PRAGMATIC GOALS

  This section discusses how digital storytelling can be used in education and training, in promotion, and for informational purposes.

- PART 4: MEDIA AND MODELS: UNDER THE HOOD

  The chapters in this section delve into specific forms of digital storytelling, including video games, immersive environments, projects for the Web, smart toys, and many other areas. These chapters offer a cross-section of examples and case studies of successful projects in each area. Several projects that did not flourish are also examined, along with the reasons for their lack of success. This is done in the belief that one can learn as much from failures as from successes.

- PART 5: CAREER CONSIDERATIONS

  This section is devoted to questions that must be answered if one wishes to work in the digital storytelling field or wishes to sustain a successful career in this arena. Should one create a showcase? What are the different ways of working in this field and what are the advantages and disadvantages of each? What legal matters should you be aware of?

Each chapter in this book opens with a series of thought-provoking questions relating to the contents of the chapter. Most chapters close with several "idea-generating exercises." These exercises give you, the reader, the opportunity to try out the concepts discussed in the chapter and to stretch your imagination. The chapters in Part 5 contain practical suggestions and tips instead of exercises, a better fit for this section.

SOURCES AND PERSPECTIVE

The material in this edition, as with the first two editions of the book, is based in part on interviews conducted with practitioners and experts in the field of digital storytelling. Twenty-two new interviews were done for this edition. The book also retains many of the highlights of interviews done for the older editions, so, in a sense, it is a compendium of wisdom from the field. Much of the information offered in this edition is supported by facts or opinions found in blogs, magazines, surveys, and publications dedicated to various aspects of digital media. The sources of this information are given in the text, after the relevant content, rather than in footnotes, which many readers find distracting.

In addition to information from experts and from printed sources, some of the content here is based on my own professional experience in the field. My personal perspective is that of a writer and a storyteller, a person on the creative side of this field, and that perspective also forms the thrust of this book. In addition, much of the content is based on many hours of playing games and exploring various works of digital storytelling, which is the great pleasure of writing a book like this.

The majority of information contained in this edition relates to projects or developments that had not yet seen the light of day when the second edition was published. In addition, some solid examples of digital storytelling from the first two editions have been retained, because these projects broke new ground and are still highly useful as models.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The field of digital storytelling moves so quickly that it is inevitable that even a brand new edition of this subject will not be able to contain everything that is new and worth noting. Whenever possible, I have offered up specific sources of information that will enable the reader to stay current, including online publications and the websites of important trade groups and organizations. I have worked hard to bring this edition up-to-date and even project into the future, but ultimately you, the reader, must take on the responsibility to carry on where I have had to leave off, and make your own discoveries.

When possible, I will post new information on the book's companion website and on my own website, www.CarolynMiller.com. I also welcome your questions and comments. These may be sent to me at Carolyn@CarolynMiller.com. The companion website can be found at www.focalpress.com/cw/miller.

Acknowledgments

In writing the third edition of *Digital Storytelling*, I received invaluable help from a number of individuals. First and foremost, these include the 22 experts in a variety of fields who allowed me to interview them and pick their brains. They were extremely generous with their time and their ideas, and this book would not be what it is without their contributions. Unfortunately, space does not allow me to list them all by name, but they are acknowledged in the sections of the book where they are quoted. I would like to give one special thank you, however, to Nick DeMartino, who kindly straightened me out on a number of matters and pointed me to some excellent projects that I've described in this book. His help was invaluable.

In addition, I would like to thank my editor, David Bevans, who has been extremely supportive and patient with me. I hope very much that this book justifies his kindness, which is greatly appreciated. Thanks also to my production editor, Emma Elder, who made the final steps so pain free for me.

My technical advisor, Douglas Lee Miller, was extremely helpful in making sure that the technical information I offered was accurate, and he also offered up some interesting information of a non-technical nature. I've included as many of these curious tidbits as possible.

I would also like to acknowledge my literary agent, Susan Crawford, who has been wonderfully level-headed and an enormous help in getting this edition nailed down properly. As always, she has been a pleasure to work with.

In addition, I would like to thank the students I have taught at the University of New Mexico and the Santa Fe Community College for their thought-provoking questions and comments. In a similar fashion, I would like to thank the people who have come to my talks and workshops in recent years. As always, I feel I learn more from my students than they learn from me!

And one last thank you goes to my two donkeys, Minnie and Pearl, who cheered me up when the going got rough and refreshed my mind when it was bogged down with a heavy load of material for this book. There's nothing like feeding fresh hay or apples to two hungry donkeys to give you a fresh perspective!

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PART 1

New Technologies, New Creative Opportunities

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CHAPTER 1

Storytelling, Old and New

In what ways is digital storytelling like traditional forms of storytelling and in what ways is it quite unique?

What ancient human activities can be thought of as the precursors of digital storytelling, and what can we learn from them?

What are the similarities between athletic games and digital storytelling, and why are they important?

What ideas can we find in classic literature, movies, and theatrical works that may have influenced digital storytelling?

STORYTELLING: AN ANCIENT HUMAN ACTIVITY

Storytelling is a magical and powerful craft. Not only can it transport the audience on a thrilling journey into an imaginary world, but it can also reveal the dark secrets of human behavior or inspire the audience with the desire to do noble deeds. Storytelling can also be pressed into service for other human goals: to teach and train young people, for example, or to convey important information. Although digital storytelling is humankind's newest way to enjoy narrative entertainment, it is part of this same great tradition.

Digital storytelling is narrative entertainment that reaches its audience via digital technology and media. One of its unique hallmarks is *interactivity*—back-and-forth communications between the audience and the narrative material. Digital storytelling is a vast field. It includes video games, content designed for the Internet, mobile apps, and even intelligent toy systems and electronic kiosks—at least 11 major and very different areas in all.

On the vast timetable of human achievements, this type of storytelling is a mere infant, only coming into being in the mid-twentieth century with the development of computer technology. As to be expected with something so young, it is still growing and evolving. Each new

development in digital media—broadband, wireless signals, mobile apps, virtual reality—sees a corresponding development in digital storytelling.

The biggest difference between traditional types of narratives and digital storytelling is that the content of traditional narratives is in an *analog* form, whereas the content in digital storytelling comes to us in a *digitalized* form. Digital data is made up of distinct, separate bits: the zeroes and ones that feed our computers. Analog information, on the other hand, is continuous and unbroken—a continual stream of information. The oldest stories were conveyed by the human voice and actors; later, narratives were printed on paper; more recently, they were recorded on audiotape, film, or video. All these older forms are analog.

To distinguish between these older forms of content and the computerized forms, people coined the term "new media." New media content includes the words and images we see on our computer screens; material that comes to us on DVDs and other discs; via streaming audio and video; and on our video game consoles, mobile phones, and tablets. All of these forms are digital. The difference between analog and digital can easily be seen by comparing an analog clock to a digital clock. An analog clock displays time in a smooth sweep around the dial, while a digital clock displays time in specific numerical increments of hours, minutes, and seconds.

Digital information can be stored easily, accessed quickly, and transferred among a great variety of devices. It can also be readily reassembled in an almost infinite number of ways, and thus becomes a viable form of content for interactivity. The digitizing of content is what makes digital storytelling possible.

Yet, as new as digital storytelling is, it is part of a human tradition that stretches back to preliterate times. Furthermore, it has much in common with other forms of narrative—theatrical performances, novels, movies, and so on. (A narrative is simply an account of events which are interesting or exciting in some way; the word is often used interchangeably with "story.") In essence, all stories have the same basic components. They portray characters caught up in a dramatic situation, depicting events from the inception of the drama to its conclusion. "Story," of course, does not necessarily mean a work of fiction, something that is make-believe. Descriptions of things that happen in real life can be stories, too, as long as they are narrated in a dramatic manner and contain characters. Newspapers and TV news shows are major vehicles for non-fiction stories. And documentaries, which are long-form explorations of true events, are also stories.

Scientists believe that storytelling can be traced back to sometime in the Pleistocene Age (1.8 million to about 11,000 years ago) and was developed as a critical survival tool. Manuel Molles, Professor Emeritus of Biology at the University of New Mexico, theorizes that storytelling was used to communicate important information about the environment, behavior of wildlife, and availability of food (from his paper "An Ecological Synthesis: Something Old, Something New," delivered at a 2005 ecology conference in Barcelona).

Dr. Dan Schwarz, a professor of English at Cornell University, also believes that storytelling shapes a basic human need. He stated in a recent interview that it was his bedrock belief "that humans are defined in part by an urge for narratives that give shape and form to their experience" (*English at Cornell*, Vol. 13).

Storytelling is such a powerful craft that telling the wrong story can even get you killed. Jeff Gomez, CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment, a transmedia production company, commented to me in an email interview: "When you think about it, many have been killed throughout history for articulating narratives out of sync with popular notions. Shamans, spiritualists and others have historically been accused of witchcraft and sorcery, targeting them for death." To back up his point, Gomez sent me a link to an article published in the *Peruvian Times* (October 5, 2011), reporting that as recently as 2011, 14 shamans had been murdered in Peru over a 20-month period.

EXPERT OBSERVATIONS: HUMANS HARD-WIRED TO TELL STORIES?

Dr. Daniel Povinelli, a psychologist from the University of Louisiana, has made some interesting observations about the origins of storytelling. Dr. Povinelli, who studies the differences between the intellect of humans and apes, feels our species has an inborn impulse to connect the past, present, and future, and in doing so, to construct narratives. As reported in the *Los Angeles Times* (June 2, 2002), Dr. Povinelli feels this ability gives us humans a unique advantage. For example, it enables us to foresee future events based on what has happened in the past; it gives us the ability to strategize; and helps us understand our fellow human beings and behave in a way that is advantageous to us.

INTERACTIVITY AND STORYTELLING

One of the things that distinguishes digital storytelling from classical storytelling is that members of the audience can become active players in the narrative and even have a direct impact on it. Surprising as it may seem, however, interactive narrative experiences like this existed long before the invention of computers.

Some professionals in interactive media hypothesize that the earliest forms of interactive storytelling took place around the campfires of prehistoric peoples. I can remember this theory being enthusiastically touted back in the early 1990s, when the creative community in Hollywood was first becoming excited about the potential of interactive media. At almost every conference I attended at the time, at least one speaker would allude to these long ago campfire scenes. The prehistoric storyteller, according to this theory, would have a general idea of the tale he planned to tell, but not a fixed plot. Instead, he would shape and mold the story according to the reactions of those gathered around him.

This model evokes an inviting image of a warm, crackling fire and comfortable conviviality. It was no doubt a reassuring scenario to attendees of these first interactive media conferences, many of whom were intimidated by computers and the concept of interactive media. But to

me, this model never sounded particularly convincing. For one thing, how could anyone really know what took place around those smoky old campfires? And even if it were true that ancient storytellers constructed their tales to fit the interests of their listeners, how much actual control or participation in the story could these campfire audiences have had? At best, it would have been an extremely weak form of interactivity.

But no matter what one thinks of this campfire model, it is unquestionably true that a form of interactive storytelling—a far more profound and participatory form—dates back to extremely ancient times. According to the renowned scholar Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), one of the earliest forms of story was the myth, and storytellers did not merely recite these old tales. Instead, the entire community would reenact them, in the form of religious rituals.

PARTICIPATORY DRAMAS

These ancient reenactments of myths described by Campbell were a form of participatory drama. He and other scholars in the field have observed that the myths acted out by a community generally contained deep psychological underpinnings, and that one of their most common themes was death and rebirth. Campbell noted that participants who took part in myth-based rituals often found the experience so intense that they would undergo a catharsis, a profound sense of emotional relief. (The word catharsis comes from the Greek, *katharsis*, and means purgation, or purification.)

In agrarian communities, these rituals would often commemorate the death of the earth (winter) and its joyous rebirth (spring). One such ritual, well known to scholars of Greek drama, was called the Festival of Dionysus. Celebrated twice annually throughout ancient Greece, these festivals were a ritual retelling of the myth of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility (see Figure 1.1). They not only depicted important events in the deity's life, but were also closely connected to the cycle of seasons, particularly the death and rebirth of the grapevine, a plant closely associated with Dionysus.

Figure 1.1 The Greek god, Dionysus, pictured on this ancient vase (ca 500 BC) was honored in intense ritual ceremonies that were an early form of interactive storytelling. Note the grapevine and clusters of grapes in the decoration. Dionysus was closely associated with the cultivation of grapes. Photograph by Maria Daniels, courtesy of University Museums, University of Mississippi.

While some details of the Dionysian rituals have been lost over time, a fair amount is still known about them. They involved singing and dancing and the playing of musical instruments. The male participants would dress as satyrs, drunken creatures who were half man and half goat (the goat being one of the animal forms associated with the god), while the women would play the part of maenads, the god's frenzied female attendants. In some Greek communities, the festival included a particularly bloodthirsty element—the participants would take a live bull (symbolizing another animal form of the god) and tear it apart with their teeth.

Ultimately, these festivals evolved into a more sedate ceremony, the performance of songs called *dithyrambs* that were dedicated to Dionysus. These choral performances in turn evolved into classic Greek drama, both tragedy and comedy, which continued to retain the influence of the early rites. The word "tragedy," in fact, comes from the Greek word *tragoidia*, which means "goat song."

MYTHOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING

The Greeks were by no means the only ancient community to reenact its myths in dramatic performances. The ancient Egyptians also held religious rituals based on their mythology. Over time, they evolved into staged performances, with actors playing the role of various gods. These early forms of drama actually pre-dated Greek theater. Campbell asserts that the reenactment of myths was a common element of all preliterate societies. Even today, in regions where old traditions have not been erased by modern influences, isolated societies continue to perform ceremonies rich in mythological symbolism.

One such group is the Dogon people of Mali, West Africa, who live in clay dwellings tucked into the steep cliffs of the Bandiagara Escarpment, not far from the Sahara desert. Because this region is so remote and relatively inaccessible, the Dogon have managed to preserve their ancient traditions and spiritual practices to this day. Many of the Dogon's beliefs are reenacted in elaborate dance ceremonies, during which participants don masks and full body costumes. Unlike dancers in Western culture, where troupes are made up of a select few talented individuals who perform for an audience of nonparticipants, in Dogon society, every member of the community takes part in the dances put on by their clan.

One of the most dramatic of these ceremonies is the Sigui dance, which takes place just once every 60 years. It contains many of the elements Joseph Campbell noted as being customary in important ritualistic ceremonies, such as a representation of death and a rebirth. In this case, the Sigui dance symbolizes the passing of the older generation and the rebirth of the Dogon people.

Although the actual ceremony is performed at such great intervals, every so often a version of it will be presented to visitors who make the difficult trek to the Dogon's cliff dwellings. Some years ago, I had the great privilege of witnessing the Sigui dance. It was an extraordinary sight to see the costumed dancers appear, as if from nowhere, and make their way into the center of the village where we waited. A number of them danced on stilts, making them as tall as giants, and all the more impressive.

Each dancer plays a highly symbolic and specific role. Their masks and costumes represent important animals, ancestors, and spirit figures in their belief system (see Figure 1.2). In the eyes of the community, the dancers are more than mere human beings; each is an *avatar* for a mythological being or spirit—the embodiment or incarnation of an entity who is not actually present.

Figure 1.2 The Dogan dancer on stilts represents a female *tingetange*, or water bird. Dogan dancers don masks and costumes to portray mythological beings or spiritual figures much in the same way as game players control avatars in digital dramas and games. Photograph courtesy of Stephenie Hollyman.

A student of mine who lived on the Navajo Nation recalls another example of a participatory drama that was reenacted every fall by the Apaches. He told me: "I'd always be afraid of the 'Apache dancers.' They danced around with sticks and have their faces covered with black cloths with their bodies all painted in black. They looked like a nightmare coming into reality and once I'd hear those bells on their ankles jiggling I'd be the first running behind my parent to hide. Trust me, there is a reason. The dancers would stop in front of a crowd and go out and grab people to dance with them or have them participate in the story they were performing."

Odd though it may seem, the rituals performed by the Apaches, the Dogons, and the ancient Greeks have a great deal in common with modern-day digital storytelling. After all, they involve the use of avatars; they are a form of role-play; participants interact with each other and work toward accomplishing a particular goal; and they play out scenes that can be highly dramatic and even have life and death significance. To me, these ritual reenactments are a far more intriguing model of interactivity than that of the old campfire stories.

FAMILIAR RITUALS AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Closer to home, and to our own lives, we can examine our own holidays and traditional religious practices and discover other surprising similarities to digital storytelling. These celebrations are often forms of participatory drama and contain items of important symbolic or mystical value, just as works of digital storytelling do. And in some cases, they are also *multi-sensory*. In other words, they involve the senses in a variety of ways.

The Jewish holiday of Passover is a particularly good example of this. Passover commemorates the exodus of Jews from Egypt and their liberation from the slavery imposed on them by the Pharaoh. The traditional way to observe Passover is at a ceremonial meal called the Seder, where the dramatic story of exodus is recounted, and is recreated by the symbolic foods that are part of the ritual.

For example, one eats a flat unleavened bread called *matzo*, which recalls the bread hurriedly made during the exodus, when the escaping Jews had no time to let their bread rise. Another special Seder food is a bitter herb called *maror* (customarily horseradish), which symbolizes the bitterness of slavery. It is eaten together with *charoset*, a sweet chopped mixture of apples, nuts, and spices, which represents the mortar the Jews used to build the pyramids and also hints at the sweetness of freedom to come. These are among the many symbolic foods eaten during the ritual. And in addition to the foods consumed, a traditional Seder includes another sensory element: the participants recline on pillows instead of sitting upright in chairs. This is a reminder of another aspect of the exodus story (through body position and the softness of the cushions): once the Jews were liberated, they were free to eat like noble families, in a reclining position.

Many forms of digital storytelling are multi-sensory in this way, involving tactile feedback, aromas, motion, and other stimuli. The addition of multi-sensory components adds to the immersiveness and emotional power of works of digital storytelling.