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'Placing' Emotions through Digital Storytelling: exploring new methods in geography

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Abstract

The 'emotional' turn in contemporary geographical research has prompted many geographers to engage critically in qualitative methodologies. This paper will introduce the concept of digital storytelling as a methodology for exploring place and emotion in geographical research. I will discuss the theory and practice of digital storytelling based upon the model developed at the Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California. I then present some observations from my recent fieldwork experience, including the presentation of a short digital story that I created at the workshop. Drawing primarily on geographical work on emotion, memory and place, alongside qualitative methods in geography, I will explain some of my fieldwork observations. Finally, I present some preliminary ideas on the use of digital storytelling as a method for contemporary cultural/social geographical research.

Critical qualitative methodologies

In a recent (2007) issue of *Progress in Human Geography*, Gail Davies and Claire Dwyer report on the state of qualitative methodology in geography. They explore, and comment on, where and in what ways methodological innovations are happening in the discipline, and discuss the ways and means by which these new approaches are being driven.

They open their investigation by drawing attention to John Law's 2004 text *After method: mess in social science research*, and some critique he offers on current forms of qualitative research practice for understanding and knowing the world. Although Davies and Dwyer are quick to point out that Law's aim is not to reject the current range of methodologies in use, they do accept his suggestion that we should be more critical of how our current methods of exploring the world are framing our particular understandings of it. They acknowledge work of others (Law and Urry, 2004; Markussen, 2005) that support the notion that all research is performative and that the methods we employ help create the understandings we interpret from different situations. Methodological practice, therefore, not only relates to how we conduct ourselves 'in the field' but also how we interpret our findings, and relate, ethically, to the entire process.

In reflecting on Law and others, Davies and Dwyer recognize a need to respond to the complex, layered nature of the world and, from this, our inability to fully understand it. They call for a replacement of 'the pursuit of certainty' in social science research with a recognition that the world is so textured as to exceed our capacity to understand it, and thus to accede that social science methodologies and forms of knowing will be characterized as much by openness, reflexivity and recursivity as by categorization, conclusion and closure (Davies and Dwyer, 2007, 258).

Recently, qualitative research in human geography is concerning itself with emotion and embodiment. A formal 'call' for attention to emotion in geography was made by Anderson and Smith in the journal *Transactions* in 2001. The authors encourage geographers to examine the relevance of emotion, and discover a 'geographic' sensibility to emotion. According to Anderson and Smith, it was time that geographers explore more fully "the extent to which the human world is constructed and lived through the emotions" (2001, 7).

Emotion in geography can be questioned as ways of knowing, being and doing in the world, and how emotional relations are shaping society and space. Emotional geographies is opening up new doors to 'knowing' in geographical and social science research (Davies and Dwyer 2007). A number of geographers are already familiar with qualitative approaches to research which is emotional and embodied (Longhurst, 2001; Moss, 2002). Much of this work comes out of feminist and humanist traditions in the discipline and includes research practice that recognizes the relational, emotional and affective aspects of the research setting and the researcher.

The question I have used to inform this article draws on such traditions in an attempt to address the challenge of how to grasp the emotional geographically. I explore how emotion is invoked and interpreted through the practice of digital storytelling, and whether such practice provides a valuable addition to our current repertoire of methods for understanding the 'messiness' of our world.

It is useful to consider why digital storytelling has thus far escaped the attention of geographers. One argument is that post-rationalist approaches to thinking about geography are relatively new, and historically not considered 'good' scholarship. Feminist geography in particular has challenged this by highlighting power and politics in social relations. As Anderson and Smith note:

The gendered basis of knowledge production is possibly a key reason why the emotions have been banished from social science and most other critical commentary for so long. The marginalization of emotion has been part of a gender politics of research in which detachment, objectivity and rationality have been valued, and implicitly masculinized, while engagement, subjectivity, passion and desire have been devalued, and frequently feminized (Anderson and Smith, 2001, 7).

Digital storytelling: a new method for 'placing' emotions in geography?

The exploration of audio-visual media through digital storytelling has the power to contribute to new understandings of emotion in social and cultural geography. As a method, the practice may help geographers explore and understand the significance of emotions in everyday life and help us consider how spaces and places produce and are produced by emotional and affective life.

Digital storytelling as a method can ask questions similar to, for example, Gillian Rose's (2004) examination of family photographs with women. Rose (2004, 552) writes:

Our conversations explored who took photos in their household, when and why, and what was done with the photos once they were developed. I was taken around every house to see photos on display, and in all but three cases I was shown many albums of photos as well, and sometimes boxes too. I asked how these mums stored, framed and placed their photos. How did they see their photographs through these kinds of practices, I wondered? With what emotions, and what meanings? Through what kind of visibility? With what kinds of gestures? Through what kinds of voices and silences? And what kinds of spaces were reproduced in that interaction?

Questions posed by Rose (2004) in her visual approach to examining family photographs with women demonstrate a geographical methodology upon which I believe digital storytelling can build. For example, Why do participants choose a particular story to tell? Why do they choose particular images over others to illustrate their stories? Why do they order their images in a particular way? How were they affected by the recording of their own voice? What emotions did the process generate, and what sorts of meanings did this create for them and for their audience?

In this paper, I have focused primarily on the digital storytelling workshop process for creating digital stories. However, many questions remain, particularly surrounding the interpretation of digital stories. Rose (2007: 13) argues that interpretations of visual images meet and make meaning at three sites - the site of production, the site of the image, and the site of the audience - but that there are theoretical disagreements about the relative importance of these sites for visual interpretation. I argue that geographers can use digital storytelling as a method for

capturing emotional information, through the videos themselves, through the storyteller's voiceover, through their affect on the audience, and through the storyteller's own interpretation of their digital stories. Therefore, digital storytelling, and its various sites for interpretation and meaning making, is a necessary area for further research.

Digital storytelling

The way that I discuss digital storytelling in this paper is based upon the theory and practice developed at the Centre for Digital Storytelling in Berkley, California. The Centre for Digital Storytelling was founded in 1994 by performance artists and theatre directors Dana Atchley and Joe Lambert. The CDS model, as I will refer to it, is not just a practice, but a process. In fact, I argue that it is the process as an expression of the theory that distinguishes the CDS model from other forms of digital storytelling. It is within this CDS model that I will describe digital storytelling.

Technically, a digital story is simply storytelling enhanced by computers. Digital stories can be found on You-Tube, corporate websites, the San Diego arts website (<http://www.sandiego.gov/public-library/services/digitalstorytelling.shtml>) just to name a few; the examples are many, and to date may be more commonly explored in the media literature. In a recent interview I conducted with Lambert, he defines digital storytelling as:

kinda the halfway point between slide show and filmmaking . . . [technically] it's not essentially new when you get down to it, you know. So then you have to kinda make the distinction of how it's made, and who it's made by. . . . Making digital stories, it's a process for democratisation of voice, but it's also about a sort of amateur exploration of the toolsets of the screen (individual interview).

Digital stories are normally a 3-6 minutes long and are produced using a desk top or lap top computer using a range of software editing packages. The CDS method most often uses Adobe Final Cut Express or Adobe Premier. The resultant mini movie is a multi-media production, incorporating still and/or moving image, recorded personal voiceover, and soundtrack.

The workshop process

The CDS workshop process is critical to understanding it's distinctiveness in regard to other digital stories/storytelling. The CDS runs a standard 3 day open workshop, specialized workshops, and train-the-trainer workshops, within the United States and internationally. The 5 ½ day train-the-trainer workshop is comprised of a two day 'training' period, a 3 day hands on training for storytellers, and a ½ day review for the trainees.

In the standard 3 day workshop, participants are given some instruction prior to the workshop. In general, participants are asked to bring a story, written or in idea form, and some images they would like to use, if possible. Therefore the process of digital storytelling really begins prior to the actual workshop, as participants are asked to think about a story they would like to tell, and think about choosing images to go along with it.

Day 1 of the workshop involves a number of things. First, participants are asked to introduce themselves, who they are, what they do, explain their interest in digital storytelling, and say something very brief about the story they would like to tell. In the first hour or so, the workshop process is introduced. In order to get participants thinking about a story they may wish to tell, if they don't already have one in mind, a 'prompt' is sometimes used. A typical prompt might be something like, 'write a postcard to someone, and say thanks'.

Next, participants are introduced to the 'seven elements of a digital story'. Digital storytelling workshop participants arrive with a great range of skills and life experience that influence the stories they will tell. CDS facilitators recognise that one of their major roles is in coaching storytelling participants, and easing any obstacles they may face in the process. Recognising that "story coaching is a dynamic process, not a prescribed one" (Lambert et al., 2006, 9) many issues arise in the course of the workshops. The CDS has developed what they refer to as the 'seven elements of digital storytelling' which they apply in view of the technical and emotional

aspects of story coaching. These elements have evolved over time, through numerous workshops, and are used to guide participants in creating a multimedia story. The 'elements' are deliberately kept simple, inspirational, brief, but non-formulaic.

Three of the seven elements are 'point of view', 'dramatic question' and 'emotional content'. I will describe these as a group, and in a much abbreviated format, as they are particularly pertinent to my argument. Every facilitator approaches the teaching of these elements in a slightly different way, however, a common prompt for participants to begin thinking about the dramatic question and emotional content of their story is the desire for resolution, or overcoming something.

When approaching 'emotional content', the emphasis is on honesty. Many digital stories are memorial stories, where an emotional connection comes naturally. However, many others are about some kind of a struggle and what often is ultimately produced is an expression of 'change', over time, between the story and the storyteller. Along with point of view, two other elements, the dramatic question and emotional content, set up a desire on the part of the audience to follow a story through to the end. The digital story is a audio-visual account of how the storyteller has gotten from point A to point B, spatially and/or temporally, rather than just an exposition of some phenomenon.

The CDS approach to workshop facilitation attempts to construct a specific narrative context for participants in order to transform digital stories into a powerful product for their audience, as described above. The 'powerfulness' of the story is often thought of in terms of its emotional affect. Although there has been anecdotal critique of digital storytelling's prompting a confessional culture through its narrative form, different CDS facilitators influence the form through their own individual teaching styles and creative influences. Moreover, I would argue that the 'right way' to construct narrative context is contestable between CDS facilitators, given their respective strength and experience, particularly in different thematic and cultural workshop contexts. In my experience with six different CDS facilitators, although they remained relatively true to the established narrative form, their individual emphases in working with participants varied significantly. The emotive affect of each individual story, therefore, is not tightly prescribed, and comes through more or less strongly in the various multi-modal layers of the digital story.

Each workshop participant is regarded as having their own, 'authentic' story to tell. Kaare and Lundby (2008), however, have critiqued CDS notion of authenticity. They note that authenticity is connected to a cultural product and therefore, in the case of digital storytelling, one which carries the capacity to represent the identity of the storyteller. Kaare and Lundby (2008) regard digital storytelling as producing a 'mediated' identity, one that can only be perceived or assumed as authentic. The authenticity of digital storytelling is, therefore, 'mediated' by the process of the workshop, or as Kaare and Lundby (2008:119) state "the authenticity inherent in this genre will depend more on how, and under what circumstances, the story is told than on the references to the life story of the narrator, that is the autobiographical evidences".

The remaining four elements have to do with the more technical aspects of the digital story. These are 'voice', 'sound', 'pacing' and 'economy'. I will briefly discuss 'voice' as I believe it represents another aspect of the contribution of digital storytelling as an emotionally embodied method.

Digital stories have an impact on the audience because we hear the storyteller's own voice, telling their own story. This can be challenging because many people who attend digital storytelling workshops have never written or told a personal story. It is also a challenge for the facilitators and participants because of the intimacy of the experience; the storyteller is right there, you feel you are in the story with that person, in their head, at that moment. It is important that participants are given a quiet place to write their story, and perform their story. Performing, or recording the story, can be one of the hardest parts of the process for the storyteller; it can be quite daunting to hear one's own voice telling their story, and then played back in recorded form. Re-recording/re-editing is possible, and it is often a huge struggle for many people. In some cases, people can only record their story one line at a time. Recording a story can generate

emotion quite distinct from those which can emerge during the story circle, and story boarding components of the workshop. That emotional aspect also reaches through to the audience, and I would argue that it's as much, if not more, the sound of the storyteller's voice, more so than the images, or the soundtrack, that creates an emotionally embodied relationship between the story(teller) and the audience. 'Voice' was expressed by two recent workshop participants as the most emotionally powerful aspect of the digital storytelling process:

D: I think the most powerful part of the whole [digital storytelling] process is the voice-over – both for the person recording it and the others who will hear it.

L: My previous digital story was told in a very quiet voice, but when I described my story with a lot of energy in the story circle, I could really sense people responding to it and it helped me decide that I wanted to have that energy in my second digital story.

The quotations above raise issues about digital story production and consumption, and how emotional meaning is created through digital storytelling.

The story circle is at the heart of the digital storytelling workshop process. It is also the most distinguishing feature of the CDS model and is, apart from the theory and philosophy underpinning the model, what distinguishes 'digital storytelling' from digital stories. In the 3 day, 8-10 person workshop, the story circle will last for 2-2 ½ hours, so about 15 minutes per person. The purpose of the story circle is for workshop participants to discuss their own story ideas and provide feedback to others in the group about their ideas. A number of 'ground rules' for the story circle have been developed. I feel that one is worth mentioning in the context of this paper:

1) Further feedback should begin with 'if it were my story', (keeping in mind that it is not your story).

This is relevant to my argument because, in phrasing feedback this way in the story circle, it forces participants to reflect on their own subject positioning in the digital storytelling process. Personal reflection through digital storytelling is one of the themes that I find running through much of the interview data I have analysed thus far, and I believe that it is useful for developing insight into the importance of reflection for understanding embodied and emotional geographies.

Digital storytelling is also relevant to an understanding of affective geographies, and geographical method as 'performance', as highlighted in this quote by Joe Lambert.

We carry out our storytelling process in group settings, because we believe that most people do not simply read a book and do the work. Storytelling is meant to be a collaborative art. It is much more realistic that way, and much more fun. We ... view the process of digital storytelling as an opportunity to open up, connect, learn, and grow as part as a collective (Lambert et al., 2006, 9).

The second and third days of the workshop are essentially creating the digital story on the computer. This begins with tutorials in the video and visual editing software, scanning technique, and manipulating each for more creatively nuanced affect. Participants also can continue working on their written scripts, and then record them. Great effort is made to ensure that everyone have their voiceover recording completed by the end of day 2. Day 3 is for completion of participants' stories, at least to a rough cut form, and saving to a master disk for post-production. The facilitators compile all of the stories and screen them, one by one. It was quite an emotional experience to watch others' stories, as well as expose my own. Like the story circle, this part of the workshop was very intimate and, from my observation, would not have been possible without the care taken by the facilitators to establish trust amongst the participants.

Memory, embodied knowing and emotion

From 23-28 June 2008 I participated in a digital storytelling train the trainer workshop in Colorado. The workshop took place on an organic farm, on the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, 30 or so miles from Estes Park Colorado, the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park. The setting was beautiful, and numerous people commented on its significance to the overall 'feeling' of the

workshop. I wrote in my notebook that evening:

At the end of day 1 was buzzing with questions. I went for a drive up the canyon to Estes Park, stopping several places along the way to take photos. I was blown away by the beauty of the mountains, the steam, the meadows, and the lake at Estes. I felt at home – so familiar was this place to me.

That evening I thought about the story I would tell. Having grown up in a small town in Montana, similarly located in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, I realised that I was inspired by this place, and felt that somehow my memories and emotions would be reflected in my digital story.

Owain Jones (2005) explores the interplay between emotion, memory, self and landscape in his contribution to the book *Emotional Geographies*. He uses extensive narrative to write a uniquely robust account of the memories of his childhood landscape around Cardiff, in Wales. Jones refers to the work of Patricia Hampl (1985) who describes memories as consisting of image and feeling, as event and response to an event. He writes:

Hampl says she does not want to remember through ‘the grating wheels and chugging engine of logic’ but instead through the heart – ‘the guardian of intuition with its secret, often fearful intentions [whose] commands are what the writer obeys’ (Hampl, 1995, 206, in Jones, 2005, 211).

Following on these two author’s ideas, I refer to Figure 1: the digital story that I produced while at the train the trainers workshop outside of Lyons, Colorado in June 2007. This digital story, although fully a product of the process as described above, was produced in a fraction of the usual time, because my priority at the workshop was data gathering, rather than data production, and there has been no post-production editing of the final product. There is also no soundtrack, just voiceover.

Figure1: [Placing Emotions Digital Story](#) (8mb)

Using Jones’ (2005) notion of the complex interplay of memory, environment and emotion, my ‘place’ story was inspired through my experience of the workshop. Jones (2005) describes emotions as always being part of our conscious and unconscious selves. Emotions are systemic and interact constantly with ourselves, our memories, and our environment. At any moment in time, what we do is the product of the ‘complex interplay between these processes’ (Jones, 2005, 205). Not only is life inherently emotional, he argues, but inherently spatial as well. Jones (2005, 206) writes:

Each spatialized, felt, moment or sequence of the now-being-laid-down is, (more or less), mapped into our bodies and minds to become a vast store of past geographies which shape who we are and the ongoing process of life. The becoming-of-the-now is not distinct from this vast volume of experience, it emerges from it, and is coloured by it, in ways we know and ways we don’t know. If we are all vast repositories of past emotional-spatial experiences then the quality of humanness becomes even deeper in extent and significance.

In regard to the seven elements described earlier, the environment and my personal memories of place reflect ‘point of view’ – it explains why I am telling this story, and why now – and indicates a personal, temporal/spatial identity. ‘Dramatic question’ and ‘emotional content’ are represented through a struggle, a change, and my personal desire to transfer the emotionally embodied knowledge I gained through that experience, to my children. ‘Voice’ is also significant in regard to the performative notion of the research experience. I only recorded my script once and, although I was reading it into the microphone, and had rehearsed it prior, the emotional breaks and cracks in my voice are palpable. I could have re-recorded until I had a smooth, polished narration, but that would not have been an honest, authentic, representation of my story. Recognising the significance of ‘voice’ in digital storytelling acknowledges an ‘embodied knowing’, a knowing

increasingly argued for amongst feminist and critical scholars in geography. As Longhurst (2009, 439) argues:

knowledge arises out of an individual's experience. Knowledge is not simply 'out there' waiting to be discovered. It is partial, situated and embodied, that is, it is made by individuals who are located within particular contexts.

My own digital story is a product of this complex interplay that Jones (2005) describes. Not everyone tells the same story, a locally embodied place story, however, I would argue that the workshop process triggered an emotional-spatial experience that Jones refers to in many of the participants. Jones argues that memories always have a spatial framework (2005, 210) and that they are emotionally coloured. He suggests a way to conceive of emotional geography is in terms of the connections between memory and geographical imagination.

So I want to point to these strange geographies which occupy us all, which hover between the then and the now, between our geographical imaginations and our geographical memories, to these hybrid ecologies of the self and to the other element, their emotional register (Jones 2005: 210).

My story, as a first person placed-based narrative, is an example of memory as spatial, as memory interwoven with notions of place and attachment to place. The memory of being-in-place and remembering place through emotions are, according to Jones, 'powerful elements of emotional geographies of the self' (2005, 213). It is through memory and imagination that we maintain connections across space and time. Digital storytelling creates an opportunity for understanding humanness, spatially and temporally, with greater depth and significance, something I believe is reflected in my story.

Jones (2005) describes emotions as always being part of our conscious and unconscious selves. Emotions are systemic and interact constantly with ourselves, our memories, and our environment. At any moment in time, what we do is the product of the 'complex interplay between these processes' (Jones, 2005, 205). Not only is life inherently emotional, he argues, but inherently spatial as well. Jones writes:

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Conclusion

This paper raises some important methodological considerations for using digital storytelling in exploring emotional geographies. Using a selection of geographical literature which examines memory as spatial, as interwoven with notions of space and attachment to place, I have introduced some ideas relevant to contemporary debates about critical qualitative methodologies, with particular attention to emotional geographies. The memory of being-in-place and remembering place through emotions are, according to Jones, "powerful elements of emotional geographies of the self" (2005, 213). It is through memory and imagination that we maintain connections across space and time.

The study of texts, conducting of interviews, convening of focus groups, use of ethnography, and visual analysis are all qualitative methods which are currently, and will continue to be, employed by human geographers (Davies and Dwyer, 2007). Digital storytelling provides a potentially powerful addition to the existing repertoire of geographical methods with which we explore and understand the significance of emotions. I believe it can help us consider how spaces and places

are produced by emotional life, and understand humanness, spatially and temporally, with greater depth and significance.

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