

Developing Digital Stories

written by Jeremy Huggett | 22/11/2014

Ola Henfridsson (2014) has recently argued that developing compelling stories is perhaps the most important mission of the qualitative information systems researcher. "A powerful story ... may inspire us to take action, whether it is within the realm of knowledge, the realm of practice, or at the intersection between the two." (2014, 356).

Shouldn't the same be said of the digital archaeologist – shouldn't we be developing our own narratives?

Henfridsson suggests that there are four activities associated with developing stories of the digital age:

- 1. Making sequences of events meaningful**

This entails a degree of interpretation, since the episodes, activities and choices made need to be disentangled. The storyteller weaves the narrative into a coherent sequence, often by applying a particular perspective or theoretical stance as a means of structuring and explaining the events.

- 2. Building ties to cumulative tradition**

Henfridsson suggests that simply describing new developments, new technologies, do not create a powerful story: "compelling stories of the digital age capture the tension between the conventional wisdom of the past and the emergent activities of the future" (2014, 357). Our stories need to build on what we know, to start with what we are familiar with. In doing so, we have a better chance of communicating with those for whom digital technologies are only significant for what they can do, rather than what they might represent. Stories working from the familiar, the comfortable, provide the opportunity to show how digital technologies are insinuated into the everyday and mediate the present and future of the subject.

- 3. Naming and framing**

Naming identifies the processes being studied; framing draws boundaries around them. The combination of the two enables the story to be developed. The lack of either results in aimless, rambling, unfocussed narrative and a lost, confused, and disengaged reader.

- 4. Stress-testing the intellectual account**

Multiple stories are possible, even from the same starting point – the weaving of narratives emphasise certain events or choices above others, and result in different perspectives on how an event arose. Stress-testing the story challenges its rigour and plausibility, it serves "as a way of making the intellectual account more coherent and consistent with the philosophical and methodological assumptions on which its scholarly value rests" (2014, 357).

In digital archaeology, we generally don't tell good stories, stories that grab the attention, stories

that fire the imagination. We need to move beyond the simple traditional accounts of how a technique or tool was applied to a particular circumstance, the geeky or highly technical accounts which speak (somewhat) to fellow experts but don't address the wider audience. Digital archaeologists should have a story to tell about the transformational impact of information technology within archaeology – and, as archaeologists, the transformation of culture more generally. We need to develop those compelling stories.

Reference

Ola Henfridsson 2014. 'The power of an intellectual account: developing stories of the digital age', *Journal of Information Technology* 29, 356–357. doi:10.1057/jit.2014.18