

# Digital Storytelling & Community Museums

I'm an artist who spends a lot of time attempting to demonstrate a useful role for artists within fields of endeavour where art is not a self-evident virtue. In a practical sense, this often seems to involve debunking the myth of artist-as-useless-wanker – of defining a practical application for skills often dismissed as esoteric. I work only occasionally within the so-called art-world, and far more frequently in other fields – regional and community development, urban design and, quite often in recent years, community history. I know that artists can be valuable players in this field, and the work that I'm currently engaged in attempts to substantiate this claim.

Recent advances in digital audio-visual technology have provided powerful and accessible tools that can be well applied within the community heritage sector. Within this realm there's enormous potential for fruitful collaborative endeavours involving artists, communities and historians, especially those focused on the collection, making and presentation of stories.

I've been working over the past few years on a range of digital video projects with various rural communities. Outcomes from these projects have included two series of short documentary segments for broadcast on regional commercial television, and a number of short documentary film projects with communities in different parts of the country. In all of this work, I'm interested in allowing people to tell their own stories, in their own voices – a narrative style that relies heavily on quotation and avoids voice-over commentary. I'm interested not just in what people say but also the way they say it, and the personality they project in doing so.

Digital video is an especially effective medium in projects aiming to present local voices or local vernacular. The sophisticated capacity of contemporary

editing software makes it possible to process and present diverse documentary material in interesting ways. It's relatively easy to combine first-hand storytelling with a range of illustrative material – to cut and paste and layer together archival film and photographs, depictions of artefacts and landscape, text and diverse audio material. A huge amount of stuff can be concentrated and brought together within a short piece of film, recognising that most of us are highly literate in this medium.

Dynamic and interactive presentation formats are currently evolving and becoming easier and cheaper to produce. We're fast moving beyond the era of the TV monitor and the VHS tape deck. Touch-screens offering a menu of stories with multiple narrative pathways, and movement or light triggered projections whereby large scale image and sound can envelope and transform a viewing space are just a couple of possibilities.

Currently, I'm undertaking a project with several community-run museums in country South Australia and Victoria to develop and present stories that enliven various aspects of local histories. In this new work, I'm keen to explore alternative methods of presentation that can really shift the audience dynamic beyond that generally created through small museum displays. I'd like to develop presentation styles whereby stories and images come together as a web of material. I'm interested in moving beyond a single definitive narrative – rather, I'm keen to layer material in the same way that different stories, different perspectives on any given subject are layered above and beneath one another. I'd like viewers to be conscious of this layering, and I'd like them to work a little harder in assimilating and responding to the various stories that make up a particular history. I'd like to construct narratives that are less didactic, less predictable, less easily resolved.



Still from "United We Stand – a story from Ungarra", from series of 18 short documentary television segments called "History doesn't stop now...", 2000.



Still from "Train Stories – Port Augusta & the Trans-Australian Railway", (20 minute film, 2001)

I should stress that I'm not a person blindly in love with new gizmos. I'm not talking about fiddling around in the world of digital multimedia simply for its own sake. Clearly, the medium must serve the message, not the other way around. At the same time, I'm not discounting the potential power and immediacy of the authentic artefact or the living, breathing museum guide. Rather, I'm suggesting that digital multimedia does offer enormous potential to tell stories in powerful and even beautiful ways, complimenting and extending the scope of other presentation methods. Most significantly, I think that it certainly provides potential to reach and engage new audiences.

– Malcolm McKinnon

*This article is adapted from a presentation delivered at the Museums Australia National conference in Adelaide on 21 March 2002*

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