Digital Storytelling:
Something Old, Something New

Lecture by Carolyn Handler Miller

Greetings from Santa Fe, New Mexico, and welcome, everyone, to my virtual lecture hall. I've been a guest lecturer for your program a couple of times before, and I've really enjoyed the experience. I'm particularly looking forward to interacting with all of you, given your fascinating backgrounds – I loved reading your bios and learning about all the different parts of the world where you are based and the writing work that you do. I apologize that my website is a little out of date… I haven't had a chance to update it in recent weeks, but even so, I guess it will still give you a pretty good idea of my own background and the work that I've done and am currently doing.

The topic I'm focusing on in this lecture is quite different from my first lecture, where I talked about the harnessing of interactive media for non-fiction purposes. In this lecture, I'm going to be examining the roots of today's interactive narratives, tracing them back to ancient times, and discussing what we can learn from these early forms of human expression that we can apply to contemporary forms of interactive storytelling. I call this new form of writing *digital storytelling.* By that I mean stories that use interactive digital media to tell new kinds of narratives – ones that are highly involving and immersive, and over which the user has some amount of control.

These narratives are supported by various digital platforms, such as the Internet, video game consoles, mobile devices, and so on -- at least eleven different technologies and platforms in all. I even include such things as "smart toys" and virtual reality in this category.

If you have read my bio, you will know that this kind of writing has been the primary focus of my career since the early 1990s and that I've written a book about this field, primarily from a writer's point of view. It's called *Digital Storytelling: A Creator's Guide to Interactive Entertainment.* The second edition came out just last April. And, by the way, if you look at the copy of it you will see your very own Sue Thomas was kind enough to write the forward to it!

To a large degree, this lecture reflects my own experience as a new media writer and my own personal reflections. The questions I raise and attempt to answer here date back to my earliest days of working in this field.

<u>Digging for the Roots of Digital Storytelling</u>

On the vast timetable of human achievements, computer-based interactive storytelling is a mere infant, only coming into being in the mid-twentieth century with the development of modern electronic computer technology. These narratives are also characterized by attributes rarely found in other forms of storytelling: they are interactive; they are immersive; they are nonlinear; and they are participatory, meaning that the audience not only takes part in them but can make choices that directly impact the story. Furthermore, the fictional characters in these stories commonly breach the fourth wall – the invisible barrier that separates the story world on one side and the real world on the other. In interactive narratives, it is extremely common for the fictional characters and the audience to communicate with each other and even for audience members to step into the story and play a direct role in it.

Given the fact that these narratives are so new and that they differ in so many important regards from other forms of storytelling, one might wonder if they are an

entirely modern invention. Did they enter the world like the Greek goddess Athena, who sprung into the world from the head of her father, Zeus, fully formed, dressed and armed? In other words, are these unique types of works that came into existence only because the development of the electronic computer made them possible? Or do the characteristics that make them so different from other forms of narrative possibly have roots in earlier types of storytelling and other human activities?

As a writer of interactive narratives, this question has been on my mind since I first entered the field almost twenty years ago. This is not a question to be taken lightly, because if today's interactive narratives do indeed have roots in the past, it means we have the opportunity to learn some useful and perhaps even powerful concepts from these earlier works that we can apply to the interactive narratives we are creating now.

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, and even at ones as recent as this past year, 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 theory, even if true, never sounded particularly convincing as a model. For one thing, how could anyone really know what took place around those smoky old campfires? And even if these ancient storytellers really did shape their tales according to the responses 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 agency and offered quite limited interactivity.

Back in 2003, as I was writing the first edition of my book, I remembered this over-used, under-compelling model and it sparked my curiosity. I wondered if I could find more robust examples of interactive storytelling in humankind's past, and, if so, what might be learned from them.

As it turns out, with a modest amount of formal research, some vigorous personal brainstorming and a little luck, I was able to come up with numerous examples of pre-computer interactive storytelling, rich with concepts that are applicable to today's new digital narratives. Many were hidden right in plain sight.

<u>The Power of Storytelling</u>

Before reviewing what I uncovered, however, it would be helpful to raise a related question and extremely basic one: what is a story? Storytelling is an ancient art, and an intensely magical and powerful one. 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 the young, 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.

Probably ever writer has his or her own definition of "story," but here is mine: a story is a constructed work that depicts characters caught up in a series of dramatic events, depicting these events from their inception to their conclusion. Stories can be conveyed through printed or spoken words, by actors on a stage, or by moving images on a screen, but they always contain a plot and characters, have a structure, and involve conflict of one kind or another. Stories are not necessarily works of fiction. They can also be about true events and real people. For the purposes of this lecture, I am defining "narrative" as the telling of a story. Thus, "narrative" and "story" are virtually interchangeable.

Interactive stories have much in common with classic stories. They also chronicle a series of connected events and feature characters who are dealing with conflicts and challenges. However, as noted above, they are different in profound ways. They are interactive and give audience members the opportunity to directly determine how the story unfolds and how it ends. Often members of the audience can participate as characters in the story and become deeply immersed in its events. And though, like classic stories, they also have a beginning, middle and end, they are nonlinear works, so the events in these stories do not necessarily happen in chronological order or in a fixed sequence.

The desire to tell stories appears to be extremely ancient. One of humankind's earliest forms of storytelling can be found on the walls of caves all over the world, in the form of rock art. Experts studying these ancient images believe they tell various kinds of stories: of the hunt, of human migrations, of the history of a community and of spirit quests.

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. At least two scientists have hypothesized that the ability to tell stories gives our species a distinct advantage and even feel we might be hardwired to be storytellers. One such scientist is Dr. Daniel Povinelli, a psychologist from the University of Louisiana, who studies the differences between the intellect of humans and apes. He feels humans have a unique and 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 believes storytelling 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.

The second scientist, Dr. 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).

<u>The Earliest Forms of Interactive Storytelling</u>

Returning now to my quest to find the roots of interactive stories, one of my most helpful resources was the writings of the renowned scholar Joseph Campbell (1904–1987). Campbell's work indicates that humans have been creating interactive stories for almost as long as they have been painting stories on the walls of caves. Furthermore,

these stories are far more profound and participatory than those campfire sessions so many speakers alluded to.

According to Campbell, 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. These ancient reenactments of myths were a form of participatory drama. Campbell 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.) 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 The Greek god Dionysus was honored in rituals that were an early form of digital storytelling. Note the grapevines and clusters of grapes in the decoration; grapes and wine were closely associated with Dionysus.

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."

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 predated Greek theatre. 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.

In researching the work of Joseph Campbell, I was reminded of one such ceremony I witnessed with my own eyes. It was performed in a remote village in Mali, West Africa, by a group from the Dogon tribe. The Dogon 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 Dogons' 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 sixty years. It symbolizes the passing away of the older generation

and the rebirth of the Dogon people. It thus contains a key element that Joseph Campbell

noted as being customary in virtually all ritualistic ceremonies: a symbolic representation

of death and a rebirth.

Although the actual ceremony is only performed at great intervals, every so often

a version of it will be presented to visitors who make the difficult trek to the Dogons'

cliff dwellings. During a trip I made some years ago to Mali, I had the rare opportunity to

see this dance. The costumed dancers seemed to appear as if from nowhere and made

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.
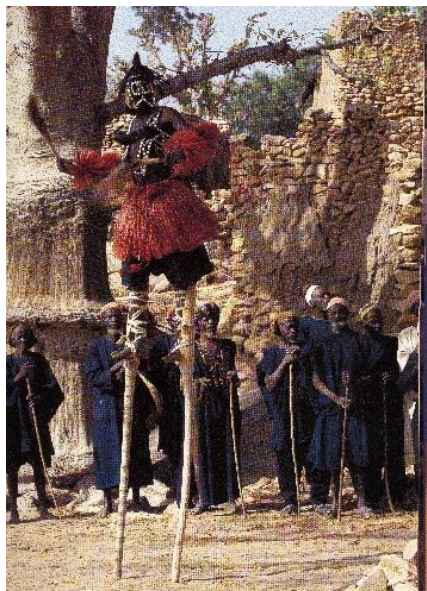

Figure 2 Dancers in Dogon rituals portray spiritual beings and serve as avatars of these beings much as players in digital dramas are represented by avatars on the screen.

Each dancer plays a highly symbolic and specific role. Their masks and costumes

represent important animals, ancestors, and spirit figures in their belief system. 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. (See Figure 2.)

Odd though it may seem, the rituals performed by the Dogons and 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 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.

<div align="center">Contemporary Examples of Participatory Dramas</div>

Participatory rituals and dramas are still being performed right up to the present day. Many of them are religious in origin, some dating back hundreds or thousands of years. For example, each year throngs of devote Muslims go on a Hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca. The Hajj, like the Festival of Dionysus, involves elements of participatory drama. One of them is called "The Stoning of the Devil" and involves throwing rocks at pillars that represent the Devil. Participants often work themselves up into a fury and hurl their rocks at the pillars as if they were the Devil himself. This ritual is a reenactment of an important story in the Muslim religion in which Abraham wards off the Devil by throwing stones at him.

Participatory rituals can vividly demonstrate the emotional power of immersiveness, an important element of interactive narratives. I can offer up two examples from my personal experience.

The first involves a medieval Spanish passion play called *Las Posadas*. It is performed at Christmas time and was brought to New Mexico about 400 years ago by the Spanish missionaries. They felt *Las Posadas* would be a simple and dramatic way to

ignite the religious spirit of the local Pueblo Indians, and hopefully turn them into good Catholics.

Las Posadas, which is Spanish for "the inns," recreates the Biblical story of Mary and Joseph's search for a place to spend the night and where Mary can give birth. It is performed with somewhat different variations in towns all over Mexico and the Southwest, including the city of Santa Fe, where I live part of the year. During my first Christmas season there, I decided to see *Las Posadas* for myself.

In Santa Fe, the procession takes place around the historic town plaza. Actors representing Mary and Joseph, accompanied by a group of musicians and carolers, go from building to building asking for admittance, but each time the devil appears and denies them entrance, until at last they find a place that will receive them.

On the evening of my first viewing of *Las Posadas*, my husband and I waited in the crowd with the other spectators, all of us clutching candles and shivering in the icy night air, waiting for the event to begin. Finally the first members of the procession appeared, holding torches to light the way. Mary and Joseph followed, with a group of carolers around them. The group paused in front of a building not far from us and they proceeded to sing the traditional song, which pleads for lodging. The devil popped up from a hiding place on the roof and scornfully sang his song of refusal. It was very colorful, very different from anything I'd seen before back in California, and I was glad we had come.

But then I noticed that a number of people were breaking away from the crowd of bystanders and joining in the procession. Spontaneously, I pulled my startled husband into the street after them. In a flash, we went from being observers to being participants,

and began to experience *Las Posadas* in an entirely different way. Walking along with the procession, we became part of the drama, too, and fully immersed in it.

For the hour or so that it lasted, I became someone else. No longer was I a twenty-first century Jewish writer. I became a pious Catholic pilgrim transported back to a wintry medieval Spanish village. Some of this I experienced on a personal and physical level: I had to watch my step, taking care not to slip on a patch of ice or trip on a curb or get ahead of the Holy Family. I was aware of the scent of burning candles all around me, and the press of the crowd. Much of the experience was emotional and communal: My husband and I would do our best to sing along with the carolers and Holy Family when it came time to ask for a room at the inn. Whenever the devil would appear on a rooftop or balcony, we would join in the hearty boos and derisive shouts of the processioners and flinch when the devil jeered us back… an interchange that clearly breached the fourth wall.

The best moment came when Mary and Joseph stopped in front of the heavy gates of the historic Palace of the Governors, the former seat of New Mexico's Colonial government. Once again we all sang the imploring song, but this time the gates swung open! A joyous cheer went up from the processioners, our voices among them, and we all surged into the courtyard. Welcoming bonfires and cups of hot cocoa awaited us.

Becoming part of *Las Posadas* instead of merely observing it transformed the experience for me. It was like the difference between watching a movie and suddenly becoming a character in it. To me, it vividly demonstrated the power of immersiveness— one of the most compelling and magical aspects of interactive narratives.

The second example from my personal life is the Jewish holiday of Passover, which I have celebrated every year of my life. Passover commemorates the exodus of Jews from Egypt and their liberation from the slavery imposed on them by the Pharaoh. The central observance of Passover is a ceremonial meal called the Seder, which recounts the dramatic story of the Exodus. The meal includes many elements of symbolic or mystical value, a number of which are also *multi-sensory*. In other words, they involve the senses in a variety of ways, and this contributes to the emotional power of the event and to its immersiveness.

A number of symbolic foods play an important 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. (See Figure 3.) One also eats a bitter herb called *maror* (customarily horseradish), which symbolizes the bitterness of slavery, 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.

Figure 3 Matzohs eaten at the Passover Seder represent the unleaven breads made by the Jews fleeing Egypt. The eating of symbolic foods is one of the multi-sensory components of this ceremonial meal and that add to its emotional power and immersiveness.

It is hardly surprising that these multi-sensory elements help make Passover one of the most memorial holidays of the Jewish calendar, and help bring the story of Exodus to life for those sharing in the Seder meal.

An increasing number of computer-based interactive narratives are also 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. Some experts in computer-based simulations, among them Jacquelyn Ford Morie, a Senior Scientist at USC's Institute for Creative Technologies, believe that multi-sensory enhancements help participants remember the experience more vividly.

The yearly holiday of Halloween is another example of a participatory celebration with ancient origins, and it can shine a light on some other aspects of today's interactive narratives. This holiday originated as a Celtic celebration called *Samhain*, and it marked the end of summer and the beginning of the dark half of the year. It was considered a

time when the spirits of the dead could return and interact with those who were still living. Again, we have the recurring theme of death and rebirth found in so many other rituals. And though today's Halloween celebrants might not be aware of what the holiday symbolized to ancient Celts, Halloween still retains reminders of death (skulls, skeletons, gravestones) and of the supernatural (ghosts, witches on broomsticks, zombies.) See Figure 4.)

Figure 4 The holiday of Halloween is filled with symbols of death and gives us a taste of an alternate reality.

One of the most alluring aspects of Halloween is, of course, the opportunity to wear a costume. Just as in role-playing video games, we can take on a new persona and "be" someone we are not in real life.

In addition, Halloween also gives us a chance to transition into a world that is quite different from our ordinary reality, a world filled with magic and the supernatural and with dark reminders of the afterlife.

This ability to get a taste of another reality and transition between two different worlds is something that we also do in certain works of computer-based interactive

narratives, and do with great ease. We can jump between two different types of realities; we can shift from one time period to another; we can leap between one geographical location and another; we can see things first from one point of view and then jump to an entirely different point of view; we can even jump between characters, playing first one and then another. The ability to move at will between different worlds, to see things from different visual points of view, or to play different characters in the same story is a powerful and unique aspect of interactive narratives.

<u>Coming of Age Rituals</u>

Joseph Campbell, who did the groundbreaking work on mythology, also noted that traditional myth-based rituals frequently reflected major life passages, such coming of age ceremonies for young boys and girls. According to Campbell, such coming of age rituals typically required the youths to undergo terrifying ordeals and tests of courage. During these rites of passage, the participants would "die" as a child and be reborn as an adult.

Campbell discovered that cultures all over the world and across all cultures told myths about the coming of age experience. He analyzed this type of myth in his seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* published in 1949. This genre of myth is often referred to as the *hero's journey*. Its core elements and recurring characters have served as a model for innumerable works of literature, including *The Odyssey*, traditional fairy tells, movies like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Star Wars*, and, of course, works of interactive storytelling, particularly video games.

One important aspect of the hero's journey is the maturation of the central character. This character starts out as a powerless boy or girl but after undergoing many tests of courage and difficult challenges he or she grows into a courageous and self assured man or woman. In drama, this type of transformation is called a *character arc*. The hero's journey, which features great tests of courage against almost overwhelming odds, is inherently involving and exciting. It is easy to imagine wanting to step into such a story, overcome a series of terrible trials and to emerge as a courageous hero. This is why the hero's journey is such a powerful vehicle for interactive narratives.

Ancient Games and Modern Interactive Storytelling

We can look back at a very different type of human activity and find another important precursor to computer-based interactive narratives: the playing of games. And like rituals and participatory dramas, games date back to ancient times and once served important functions.

The earliest games were developed not for idle amusement but for serious purposes: to prepare young men for the hunt and for warfare. By taking part in games, the youths would strengthen their bodies and develop athletic skills like running and throwing. By playing with teammates, they would also learn how to coordinate maneuvers and how to strategize. Over time, these athletic games evolved into formal competitions. Undoubtedly, the best known of these ancient sporting events are the Greek Olympic games. We can trace the Olympic games back to 776 B.C., and we know they continued to be held for more than one thousand years.

Athletic competitions were also held in ancient Rome, India, and Egypt. In many old societies, these competitions served a religious function as well as being a form of popular entertainment. In Greece, for example, the games were dedicated to the god Zeus, and the athletic part of the program was preceded by sacred religious rites.

Religion and sporting games were even more intricately mixed in the part of the world that is now Mexico and Central America. The Olmecs, Mayans, and other peoples throughout Mesoamerica played a ball game somewhat like basketball. We now know this game had great spiritual and symbolic significance to them, and was a central ritual in their culture. The game served as a conduit to the gods they believed dwelt beneath the earth and was a way of communicating with divine powers.

The game was played by two competing teams in an outdoor court marked by a set of high parallel walls. The players had to keep the ball in the air, and could use any part of their body to do this except for their hands. As in a modern ball game, the two teams vied to lob the ball into a specific target to make a goal, in this case a high stone ring. However, unlike modern ball games, once a goal was scored, the game ended, and so did the life of at least one of the players. Scholars still are debating whether this fate fell to the captain of the winning team or the losing team. They do agree, however, that the leader of one of the teams was ritually decapitated as a religious sacrifice, meant to please their gods. Visitors to the excavated ball court at Chichén Itzá, in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, can still see a stone relief depicting the decapitation ceremony. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5 This is a carving of a Mayan postgame decapitation ritual. The large circle in the lower portion of the carving represents the ball, and the figure inside of it is the skull of the decapitated player.

Over 1500 years ago, all the way across the ocean, in Asia, players faced each other in another athletic competition with deep spiritual significance. In this case, the country was Japan and the game was sumo. Sumo is closely tied to Japan's Shinto religion, and it symbolizes a legendary bout between two gods, a contest upon which the fate of the Japanese people rested. The Japanese emperor himself is believed to be a descendent of the victor. As different as sumo and the Mesoamerican ball games are, they both illustrate that games can have intensely meaningful significance. The same can be true for the games found in works of digital storytelling, where game and narrative can be closely interconnected, and where the players can be enormously invested in achieving a positive outcome.

The sporting competitions that have come down to us from ancient times were inherently dramatic. Two opponents or two teams were pitted against each other and the players were fueled by a burning goal: to achieve a victorious outcome for their side and to defeat their opponents. These old games contained many of the key elements that

continue to be hallmarks of today's athletic games. Furthermore, they are also the distinguishing characteristics of many contemporary works of computer-based narratives. The most obvious of these, of course, is video games, but these characteristics can be found in other contemporary works of interactive storytelling, as well.

For example, the act of participating can be quite meaningful to the individuals who are taking part in the activity, and furthermore, they are trying mightily to achieve a successful outcome. These experiences are extremely immersive and the drama that is unfolding is felt in a highly personal and compelling way. Both types of experiences demand active participation by their very nature; one cannot be a passive observer in an athletic game or in an interactive narrative.

In addition, both types of experiences can be greatly demanding of one's skills, either physical or mental. Furthermore, they typically involve a "cast" of characters, either other players, as in physical sports, or fictional characters, as in narrative works. Typically, the main player is the protagonist and is striving toward a highly desired goal of some sort. But other players, the antagonists, stand in opposition to this goal, exerting all their powers to prevent its attainment while succeeding at goals of their own. This clash of objectives is what makes athletic games so exciting, and it can have the same impact on interactive narratives.

The Element of Play and Interactive Narratives

The concept of play is yet another characteristic of contemporary interactive narratives that comes to us from ancient days. Children in every era and every culture have played games of all sorts. Many of them are more free flowing and less formalized

than adult games. (See Figure 6.) Children's pastimes range from "quest" games like

hide-and-seek, to games that are more social in nature, like jump rope, to games of skill,

like jacks. Children also enjoy make-believe activities like fantasy role-play. Two old

favorites, for example, are cowboys and Indians and cops and robbers.

Figure 6 Children's play activities are often free-flowing and less formalized than adult games, and this element of play can be an important part of interactive narratives, as well.

Even adults engage in fantasy role-playing activities, as evidenced by the popular

Renaissance Faires, which are elaborate reconstructions of Elizabethan England,

complete with jousting, a royal court, and someone playing the part of Queen Elizabeth I.

Many attendees come to these faires dressed in period costumes and attempt to speak in

Elizabethan English. (See Figure 7.)

Figure 7 Role-playing is an important component of many interactive narratives, but role-playing activities are also popular in real world environments, like Renaissance Faires.

Furthermore, many adults enjoy taking part in the reenactment of historic battles. Assuming the role of soldiers on one side or the other, they carry authentic weapons and take great care to get their uniforms exactly right, down to the last button. In Spain and Mexico, people take part in monumental recreations of long-ago battles between the Moors and Christians. Thousands of people participate in these events, which last many days. And, as noted earlier, Halloween gives individuals of all ages the license to don costumes and assume different identities.

Fantasy role-play activities are not strictly games, because they are not competitive in nature. They also don't follow a fixed set of rules or have a clear-cut end goal. But though they differ from more formalized games, the two pursuits have an important element in common: Both activities are experienced as "play." In other words, people engage in these activities for pleasure. Though they might involve discomfort,

difficult challenges, or even outright pain, they are activities that people engage in willingly and are not perceived as work.

Obviously, the opportunity to role-play is one of the major attractions of many types of interactive narratives. It gives individuals the chance to be something they could never be in real life and to have experiences that would otherwise be impossible. Overall, the expectation of enjoying oneself is one of the primary reasons that both adults and children have traditionally engaged play activities, including role-playing. This continues to be true in contemporary society, even when the playing is done on computers, game consoles or other electronic devices instead of on a ball field or in a schoolyard.

Useful Concepts from Participatory Drama, Rituals, Games and Play Activities

As hoped, my digging around for pre-computer predecessors of today's interactive narratives turned up a number of strong examples, many of them extremely ancient, and each of them can teach us concepts we can apply to the interactive computer-based narratives we are creating today.

For example, the reenactments of myths and religious dramas underscore the power of active participation, immersiveness, and themes that are meaningful to the participants. Many of the ancient reenactments were so emotionally compelling that they induced a sense of catharsis, and we can strive to build the same intense emotional power into our own contemporary works.

By studying ancient human rituals, we can also see that the concept of the avatar is not a new one, and that the use of avatars can be a highly effective technique to permit individuals to enter a drama and play a central role in it.

And, as Joseph Campbell has shown us, ancient rites of passage have given us an enduring dramatic theme for our interactive narratives: the hero's journey.

Participatory dramas that have come to us from ancient days also illustrate the fact that the fourth wall can be breached without damaging our enjoyment of the narrative. In fact, this ability to directly communicate with the characters in a story is one of the great pleasures of interactive dramas. It is also a highly effective technique of pulling us into the narrative.

Even the rituals and holidays that we celebrate today have lessons to teach us. For example, the holiday of Halloween hints at the thrill of being able to travel between parallel universes – in the case of this pagan celebration, between the real world on one hand and the world of the dead on the other. And the Jewish holiday of Passover also suggests that being able to add multi-sensory experiences to a narrative can heighten its emotional power and make it particularly memorable.

Ancient and modern games also have many useful contributions to make. Though today's games are primarily recreational activities, the games played by the ancients were deeply meaningful and often had symbolic or spiritual overtones, giving them great weight. But even modern athletic games illustrate the dramatic power that is inherent in the conflict between two opposing sides and also the motivating force of attempting to achieve a highly desirable goal.

Furthermore, even unstructured games and play activities, particularly the act of pretending to be someone you are not -- role-playing -- is an activity that is engaged in not only by children but also by adults. Role-playing has ancient antecedents, among

them being the Festival of Dionysus in Greece, where it had serious religious significance and could even lead to an intensely cathartic experience.

In sum, the digging I've been able to do has uncovered a great many precursors to our modern computer-based narratives. By examining these dramas, rituals and other activities, we can understand why they were so meaningful, and felt so intensely, by those who participated in them. In almost every case, we can utilize the same elements to strengthen the works we are creating today and give them greater emotional resonance.

<u>Some Things To Ponder</u>

Now that you have read my lecture, you might think about experiences in your own life that relate to digital storytelling. If you would like, I invite you to share them on the discussion board or during our live chat. For example:

1. What traditional ritual have you participated in, or are aware of, that reminds you in some way of an interactive narrative? What is it about this ritual that you think is like a work of digital storytelling?

2. Think of a time when you wore a costume or engaged in some form of role-play that did not make use of electronic technology. Describe the experience and how it made you feel. How do you think it was similar to or different from the role-playing that occurs in works of digital storytelling?

3. Can you think of any work of traditional entertainment (poem, short story, novel, play, movie, TV show, etc.) that breaks the "fourth wall"? Describe how the fourth wall is broken in this work. Could the fourth wall be broken in a similar way in an interactive work? Why or why not?

4. Have you played a video game or other work of new media that caused you to experience a catharsis? What made this work so powerful that it was capable of producing such an intense emotional experience?