

Digital Narrative and the Humanities: An Evaluation of the Use of Digital Storytelling in an Australian Undergraduate Literary Studies Program

Robert Garth Hipkins Clarke¹ & Sharon Thomas¹

¹University of Tasmania, Australia

Correspondence: Robert Garth Hipkins Clarke, University of Tasmania, Australia. E-mail: Robert.Clarke@utas.edu.au

Received: May 7, 2012 Accepted: May 28, 2012 Online Published: August 22, 2012

doi:10.5539/hes.v2n3p30

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/hes.v2n3p30>

Abstract

A growing number of university teachers advocate the benefits of multimedia and digital technologies in their classrooms. Such technologies are promoted: as a means to ensure the relevance of subject disciplines; and, as tools of engagement to assist students to meet their learning outcomes. Digital storytelling or narration is one example of how educators can utilise technology to introduce innovative teaching methods. In its broadest sense, digital narration involves using digital resources in learning environments for the production by students of multimedia narratives. This paper reports on the results, over a two-year period, of an evaluation of the use of digital narratives in an advanced undergraduate unit on contemporary Australian literature in one Australian university. The evaluation explored students' and the teacher's experiences of digital storytelling. In particular, it examined participants' satisfaction with and anxieties about the use of digital narratives. It also considered the issues that the use of digital narratives raises vis-à-vis the constructive alignment with the themes, aims, and objectives of the unit, as well as the kinds and levels of technical training and assistance required to support students and staff. The results of this evaluation will be of interest to academics considering the use of multimedia technologies in their undergraduate classes.

Keywords: digital narrative, digital storytelling, multimedia technologies, literary studies

1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of an evaluation of the use of digital narratives/storytelling, over a two-year period, in an advanced undergraduate unit on contemporary Australian literature in an Australian university. The evaluation examines the experiences of the students and the teacher. In particular we were interested in the perceived usefulness—broadly defined—of digital narratives in the undergraduate classroom: how did the new pedagogy influence student learning and the management/coordination of the unit? Drawing upon student responses to questionnaires, critical reflection essays and focus group discussions, as well as the reflections of the lecturer (the first-named author), the evaluation considered a number of issues including the constructive alignment of digital narrative pedagogy with the themes, aims, and objectives of the unit, and the level of technical training/support required for the meaningful employment of such methods.

1.1 What are Digital Narratives?

Digital narratives—or, as they are more commonly known, digital stories—are student-produced multimedia narratives (Barrett, 2006; Benmayor, 2008; Bull & Kajder, 2005; Burgess, 2006; Coventry, 2008b; Kajder, Bull, & Albaugh, 2005; Leon, 2008; Mellon, 1999; Oppermann, 2008; Robin, 2008; Tucker, 2006). Digital narratives can: range in duration from one to ten minutes; incorporate photomontage accompanied by voiceover; or be short video movies. They are generally created using inexpensive photography, video, and audio capture and editing software—such as Windows Media Maker, Photoshop, iMovie, Acrobat, etc—that are readily commercially available and/or commonly packaged with new Windows-based and Apple personal computers.

In this study we use the term *digital narrative* rather than *digital storytelling* because in many non-educational contexts the latter has become associated with discourses of personal and therapeutic transformation that may not be appropriate within an educational context. Moreover, many advocates of digital storytelling promote this technique as a *goal* and *outcome*. As the purpose of this study was to evaluate the utility of digital narratives as a

part of an pedagogical *process*, it was felt that a more value-neutral terminology should be adopted, one that envisions digital narrative as one method available to contemporary—*transliterate*—scholars.

1.2 Applications: What are the Academic Uses and Benefits of Digital Narratives?

Digital narratives are being employed in a range of educational contexts, including courses on literary studies, creative writing, American Studies, social and cultural history, teacher training, English as a second language (ESL), and gender studies (Ganley & Vila, 2006; Klaebe & Bolland, 2007; Oppermann, 2008, pp. 178-179). They are being used with increasing frequency in North American secondary school classrooms (Dogan & Robin, 2008; Weiss, Benmayor, O’Leary, & Enyon, 2002) and have been introduced into high school curricula in some Australian states (Tucker, 2006). Moreover the recently introduced Australian national curriculum for English recognizes the need for primary and secondary students to develop skills in the use digital and/or multimedia technologies. At year 10, for example, English students need to demonstrate competence to “[c]reate sustained texts, including texts that combine specific digital or media content, for imaginative, informative, or persuasive purposes that reflect upon challenging and complex issues” (ACARA, 2012). In addition to their pedagogical applications, digital narratives have been employed in a variety of social research contexts, including oral and public history projects (Klaebe, Foth, Burgess, & Bilandzic, 2007; Meadows, 2003).

It would appear that digital storytelling in the classroom brings with it a number of pedagogical benefits. The authors of a special edition of *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* in 2008 asserted, amongst other things, that digital narrative pedagogy offers students tools to investigate “texts and contexts” in non-traditional ways (Coventry, 2008a, p. 166); that it enhances students’ appreciation of theory by making “visible to students how theory emerges from personal experience and how theorising is both intellectual and creative” (Benmayor, 2008, p. 200); and that it facilitates intellectual engagement for students new to academic writing. As Lovell and Baker note, digital narrative provides an example of “transliteracy” (Lovell & Baker, 2009, p. 52), understood as “the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms and tools and media” (Thomas et al., 2007, para 1). As such, the use of digital narrative is consistent with a pedagogical commitment to the value of encouraging students to engage with and communicate ideas across a range of media platforms and genres—not just written critical essays. A recent study by Clarke and Adam (2011) supports this assertion. They interviewed six academics on their experiences of using digital narrative in Australian tertiary education settings. All six considered digital narrative as a complement to, rather than a substitute for, conventional learning and teaching such as critical research essay writing.

As a result of this research the first-named author undertook to implement a digital narrative exercise in a new undergraduate unit on contemporary Australian literary studies. Grant funding was received from the university to support the implementation, part of which involved the lecturer training in digital narrative at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI). Assistance was also received from the faculty flexible education support team who helped develop resources and training workshops. In designing the digital narrative project and the evaluation protocols, we were particularly concerned with: conceptualisation and task definition, constructive alignment, and resources, three themes consonant with the findings from Clarke and Adam’s (2011) study.

1.3 Why Use Digital Narratives in an English Studies Unit?

In some respects the answer to this question is both obvious and counter-intuitive. On the one hand it would seem that tertiary studies in English, growing as it has from literary studies, are a natural home for digital narrative. Narrative, after all, is a foundational topic of English Studies. On the other hand, it could be argued that *digital* narrative is a topic and technique better suited to the disciplines of media or cultural studies, or other cognate fields like film studies. Contemporary English Studies is founded on the exposition and analysis of *texts*, more often than not defined as verbal texts against visual or aural texts.

The first-named author teaches a third-year undergraduate unit on Australian film and literature, “Representing Contemporary Australia”. The intended learning outcomes of this unit include: the cultivation of knowledge of contemporary debates in Australian film and literary studies; and the development of close reading, critical engagement, research, and academic writing skills. It was hypothesised that digital narratives would be useful to help students to achieve these outcomes, and to encourage a deeper engagement with Australian literature.

There is evidence that digital narrative pedagogy can provide a number of clear benefits in English Studies. First, the research literature suggests that as a complement to critical essay writing, digital narrative may prove to be a useful strategy for encouraging students to undertake a *deep* rather than a *surface* approach to learning (Barrett, 2006). Second, previous studies suggest that digital narrative making is a particularly suitable approach for students from non-traditional educational backgrounds, and/or those for whom the critical essay genre is a challenge for linguistic or cultural reasons (Benmayor, 2008; Coventry, 2008b). This claim is of particular

relevance given the relatively high number of students from non-traditional educational backgrounds attending the first-named author's university. Third, the value of applying creative and imaginative techniques to critical examination of topics and texts is by no means novel to English Studies: creative writing, for instance, has long enjoyed an important place in English Studies. Fourth, there is evidence that digital narrative pedagogy encourages classroom collaborations by providing a context for discussion and participation. Dialogue and discussion are at the heart of English Studies pedagogy. The reluctance of some students to engage in discussion is a challenge in English Studies. It was hoped that the process of digital production would facilitate greater in-classroom engagement.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample

Eight (N=8) students in 2010 and four (N=4) in 2011, in their second and third years of undergraduate study at a regional Australian university, participated in this study. There were four male and eight female students with an average age of 20.5 years (range: 19–22 years). All students were enrolled as *internal* students: they attended face-to-face classes. The unit attracts a substantial cohort of *distance* students: students who undertake studies via recorded lectures and sessions, and online material. Given the logistics of the project and geographical dispersal of distance students, only students enrolled as *internal* could undertake the digital narrative evaluation project for the purposes of the evaluation study.

2.2 Digital Narrative Implementation

The digital narrative project was undertaken in the first six weeks of the thirteen-week semester. In the first week students were introduced to the exercise—its rationale and intended outcomes—and provided with information sheets, consent forms (for the purposes of the evaluation study), and preparatory material for a software training session scheduled for the following week. At this time students were given the task description. Students were also introduced to the unit's online learning website, and a subfolder that they could access that included links to examples of digital narratives—including one created by the lecturer based on his own research work—and information sheets on all aspects of digital narrative making. They were also provided with criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) marking sheets: for the digital narrative and critical reflection essay, respectively, and a project schedule that articulated the different stages of the project.

At the commencement of Week 2, students and the lecturer undertook a *story circle* activity that became a regular feature of each successive class: students were invited to share their ideas with the class and provide updates on the progress of their digital narratives in relation to the project schedule. Students were also introduced to the members of the faculty's flexible education (FE) support team who directed a workshop on how to create digital narratives using iMovie software, held during tutorial time in the faculty computer lab. The FE team and the lecturer attended successive tutorials in the computer lab to check on student progress and answer queries.

Students submitted their digital narratives in mp4 format on a DVD in Week 5 of semester. In Week 6 they submitted their critical reflection essays. Students received grades and feedback on both parts of the project. Students were given the option of resubmitting their digital narrative to address specific elements identified by the lecturer, i.e. the quality of the images, soundtrack, expression of ideas, intellectual content, and so on. In the final week of the semester students viewed all of the digital narratives in class.

2.3 Evaluation Methodology

Evaluation focussed on student and lecturer experiences of digital narrative making, specifically the usefulness of this technique. This was explored from three perspectives: students, lecturer and literature, three of the four lenses highlighted by Brookfield (1995) as being essential to critically reflective teaching practice. In order to avoid conflict of interest between the students and the lecturer, two third parties were employed to gather and analyse data from the student perspective, one a research assistant and one (the second named author) an academic developer from the central university professional development unit with 18 years of experience in higher education.

Three sources of data were used in evaluating the usefulness, from a student perspective, of the digital narrative assessment task: mandated student evaluation of teaching and learning (SETL) questionnaires, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data; individual, personal student reflections in critically reflective essays that complemented the digital narrative; and focus group interviews. These three data sources served varied and complementary evaluative purposes.

2.3.1 Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning (SETL)

SETL questionnaires provided cross-sectional data: anonymous, summative and holistic student perspectives on their experience of the unit in general, the teaching of the unit, as well as the digital narrative assessment task, specifically. In terms of quantitative data, as well as ten compulsory unit-based questions related to generic curriculum design and delivery and ten compulsory teaching-based questions related to the lecturer's teaching performance, students answered 21 questions that related specifically to the digital narrative assessment task (see Appendices A and B). Students also provided free form prose responses in relation to advice or feedback about the unit, the teaching of the unit, or the digital narrative assessment task, specifically.

2.3.2 Critical Reflection Essay

The critical reflection essays, completed in conjunction with the digital narratives, provided an opportunity for students to comment in an extended way on the usefulness of the digital narrative assessment task, within the framework of the entire unit, particularly as it related to the disciplinary content of the unit.

2.3.3 Focus Groups

By its very nature a site of co-construction, the focus group provided an opportunity for students to interact and thus challenge and extend each others' perspectives, the ultimate aim being "to be able to draw conclusions about the [the students'] views, ideas or experiences" (Hydén & Bülow, 2003, p. 306). Moreover, as Farnsworth and Boon (2010) point out, focus groups provide a "pragmatic advantage" in terms of their "efficiency" (p. 607): consequently, we were able to glean multiple perspectives within a bounded time frame.

Two focus groups were conducted, the first immediately after the completion of the task (approximately half way through the semester). They were designed to gauge current student feelings and perspectives on the value and relevance of the task to the unit content; their expectations, concerns and perceived benefits; as well as their views on the resourcing of the assessment task. The second focus group was held in the final week of semester after feedback had been received on the digital narrative assessment task. It provided two specific opportunities: first, a retrospective space where students could comment on any changes in thinking since the first focus group, and second, a specific space for commenting on lecturer assessment approaches. Attendance at both focus groups was voluntary (6 students in 2010, and 4 in 2011). Each was audio recorded and transcribed.

2.3.4 Lecturer Reflections

Lecturer reflections on the implementation process are also included.

Reference is made to literature throughout the following analysis section to provide evidence of similarity with or difference to the student and lecturer perspectives provided in this study.

3. Results

3.1 Data Analysis

3.1.1 Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning (SETLs)

Feedback from the SETL questionnaire suggested that all students enjoyed the unit, valued the teaching, and developed new skills as a result. Of the twelve students who completed the digital narrative assessment task, eleven (92%) responded to the SETL questionnaire. Of the total responses to the compulsory *unit-based* questions, 99% selected either *agree* or *strongly agree*. Of the total responses to the *teaching-based* questions, 100% selected either *agree* or *strongly agree*. Thus, students' overall experience of the unit was consistently positive.

The responses to the 21 digital narrative-specific questions (see Appendix B) were somewhat more varied and provided interesting insights into those aspects of the unit that students experienced more positively or neutrally (no students recorded a "disagree" or "strongly disagree" response). Given the variability of responses and the small sample size we are hesitant to claim generalisability. It should be pointed out that the majority of students (75%, N=9) selected either *agree* or *strongly agree* as their response to the 21 questions related to their digital narrative experience. The most consistently positive responses were received in relation to the following statements:

- "Sufficient technical support was provided to assist me to complete my digital narrative";
- "the expectations for the Critical Reflection Essay were clearly reflected in the marking criteria sheet for this part of the project"; and,
- my grade for the Critical Reflection Essay reflects the time and energy that I devoted to this part of the digital narrative project.

The points above illustrate a discerning perspective: that is, students commented on a range of aspects of the learning and teaching experience, from technical support to assessment.

Qualitative SETL data was minimal. Only three students responded in free form prose. Those free form comments that were provided were positive and supportive in nature and related primarily to the level of interest and engagement generated by the digital narrative task. Some suggestions were made in relation to resourcing:

- *“enjoyable to attempt a different task”*
- *“all-consuming, but fun”*
- *“thoroughly enjoyed, good texts and generated an interest in a subject I thought would have been dry”*
- *“it is clear that [the lecturer] has a passion for this area”*
- *“having the [computer lab] support people around later in the process would have been good”*

3.1.2 Critical Reflection Essays and Focus Group Research Data

The richest sources of data for the evaluation of the students' perception of the usefulness of the digital narrative assessment task as a learning and teaching technique were the critically reflective essays and the focus group discussions. Of the twelve students who completed the digital narrative, nine (75%) specifically made reference to the assessment task in their essays. Ten (83%) students participated in the first focus group and 11(92%) participated in the second. Insights from both sources will be reported here collectively.

Students consistently and convincingly identified the benefits—in terms of their learning—of the digital narrative assessment task. Their responses fell into three distinct categories: benefits defined in terms of (a) skill development, (b) motivation, and (c) enhanced understanding of unit content.

Skill development, although challenging in many instances, was recognised by most students as one of the more direct and beneficial outcomes of the digital narrative experience. Although initially collectively *“daunted,” “excited,” “happy,” “freaked out,” “worried,” “concerned”* and *“terrified”* by the prospect of undertaking such an innovative assessment task, most students accepted the challenge, recognising that growth would occur as a result. This perspective is mirrored in the SETL feedback in which students positively identified the challenging as well as the enjoyable aspects of creating the digital narrative. These students clearly understood, albeit tacitly, the exponential growth in learning that occurs when, as adults, they are faced with disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 1991). They recognised, also, that their skill development relied heavily on the support provided by the computer lab support staff.

- *“Searching for appropriate images and recording my script led me to more closely analyse my writing.”*
- *“I was pushed out of my comfort zone, but without the stress and frustration that sometimes comes with learning something new.”*
- *“I enjoyed learning about how to use a Mac and iMovie and construct something new, not only learning unit content, but a new way of presenting information.”*

Students also identified the value of peer support in their learning of digital technology, underscoring the growing body of literature espousing the benefits of peer learning (e.g. Havnes, 2008).

- *“You just kind of ask each other and that’s sort of how you learn.”*
- *“If there was a question, we would just bounce it off each other.”*

Enhanced motivation for learning, as a direct result of doing *“something different,”* was identified by a number of students. In particular, being able to complete an assessment task where they *“didn’t have to write another essay for once,”* was *“appreciated”* and ultimately a *“rewarding”* experience, even though more time consuming.

- *“It’s so easy just to use other people’s opinions and not express your own. That’s what I found most beneficial about the digital narrative project. It was one of the few chances we get to actually create an affirmed opinion that is our own and not just regurgitating other people’s material. By this stage in our university careers we can summarise other people’s arguments; that’s not really a challenge, but it is a challenge to come up with an informed argument of your own.”*

Students in the 2011 cohort implied that their enhanced motivation was a direct result of the use of exemplars.

- *“It was drilled into us that it didn’t have to be a masterpiece movie and we saw examples of other ones...so you looked at them and thought, ‘Oh, I can do that’.”*
- *“They were fantastic, just to get a rough idea.”*

- *“Yeah, just to get any sort of idea makes you feel a lot better.”*
- *“There were so many different ideas and that took the pressure off.”*
- *“It helps to see a range of ability in the final product because you know a weaker digital narrative might give you confidence that you can go ahead and do it, whereas if you just watch high distinction one [sic], you might get put off for reasons that have nothing to do with the digital narrative.”*

One student was particularly appreciative of the lecturer making his own personal digital narrative available as an exemplar: *“it was really good because teachers don’t always put up what they have done and it just made it a lot clearer.”*

Enhanced understanding of unit content, as a result of completing the digital narrative, emerged strongly in students’ essays and the focus groups. This was the outcome that revealed the most profound insights from students. Many commented on the fact that the digital narrative allowed them to explore and interface with contemporary Australian literature content from a more personal perspective rather than the traditional third person objective stance that is often required with essay writing. While some found this challenging, they recognised that they were interacting with the material in a way that deeply touched their identities. The students’ responses in this regard appear to be consistent with the general research on digital narratives (see, for example, Benmayor, 2008). Student responses included:

- *“Thinking about how you identify with Australian literature and culture was also a personal growth thing.”*
- *“The digital story aspect provided a deeper understanding and respect for the unit.”*
- *“Developing a concise script, sharing my ideas, selecting images, and recording the script contributed to my understanding of Australian literature and what it means to me...it assisted in the development of my idea in relation to connections between the work of [Australian writers].”*
- *“It was a lot more personal, like I could barely remember what Australian literature I had seen or read until I did the digital narrative.”*
- *“It really helped with perception...you didn’t realise it was influencing you.”*
- *“You can relate to the material a lot more when [the lecturer] talks about it now, like talking about identity.”*
- *“In the beginning I thought Australian literature was foreign to me, but then doing the digital narrative I realised that I actually have been exposed to tonnes, I just hadn’t realised and that made it more encouraging to learn.”*
- *“It forces you to get in there and actually think for yourself.”*
- *“It encouraged people to put their own opinions out there, reflect on their own upbringing, their family, their prior education and relate it to the unit.”*
- *“I think by using the digital narrative I actually learnt more about Australian literature...if we hadn’t done it I don’t think I would have had more of an opening for learning. It’s kind of opened my mind to learn more things in class.”*
- *“Each week demonstrated how closed-minded my personal interpretation of Australian literature had become.”*
- *“Production time for the finalized narrative was five weeks, and during this time my ideas and approaches toward the set questions were both challenged and transformed...the development of ideas gave me a new direction to critique.”*

Insight into effective unit design—and the concomitant positive impact on learning—was apparent from a number of students’ comments. While unfamiliar with the term “constructive alignment” (Biggs & Tang, 2007), students made reference to the close alignment of unit aims and assessment.

- *“There is no way you can get out of it with that kind of question [i.e. the task description]; you’ve got to relate it back to everything you’ve been learning.”*
- *“You have to relate the digital narrative to the unit because you have to relate it to the texts done in the unit so you have to bring in everything that you have done so far.”*

Students’ perceived benefits of the digital narrative as a learning and teaching technique was inherently related to the assessment process employed by the lecturer. Reference was made to the “positive” nature and “thoroughness, clarity and conciseness” of the feedback as well as the “helpfulness,” particularly in terms of “reducing

ambiguity” of the criteria marking sheets. As one student commented, “*We knew what we were working towards.*” Another said, “*I looked at it and I was like, ‘Oh this is what I am actually meant to do.’*” Students clearly valued the feedback they received, for example, “*The good thing about [the lecturer] is that he actually writes a thorough page on what you’ve done.*” Interestingly, over half the students from the 2010 cohort commented that they would have liked more detailed feedback from the lecturer in relation to what they had done well, rather than focussing on ways to improve. This stands in some contrast to students’ characteristic desire for advice on how to improve that has been consistently acknowledged in higher education learning and teaching literature (see, for example, Boud, 2000; Lizzio, 2008; Nicol, 2010; Sadler, 2010). This disparity could perhaps be explained by the students in this study working in an innovative assessment area without previous experience and therefore seeking explicit affirmation of their new skill development. The 2011 cohort, however, made reference to the “very specific and very helpful feedback” focussing on how they “could improve”: this included the guidance provided by the criteria sheet. The difference between the two cohorts’ comments suggests the direct benefit to be gained—in terms of student learning—from lecturers responding to student feedback from previous years.

All students appreciated the opportunity, although not all accepted (primarily because of time constraints), to resubmit the digital narratives for an improved grade, exemplified by the following comments:

- “*It’s really good that we’ve had an opportunity...to go back and change things.*”
- “*It could be that couple of percent that could get you over the line at the end of the year.*”

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative data collected suggest that these students reacted positively to the digital narrative project and that student learning outcomes were enhanced as a result of this form of pedagogy.

3.2 Lecturer’s (First-named Author’s) Reflections

Introducing digital narrative in the unit “Representing Contemporary Australia” has required reflection on the place of technology within the literary studies classroom, as well as consideration and planning of logistical support. It has also demonstrated the value of proper evaluation of teaching innovations. The experience has also made me reconsider the nature of the discipline I teach—Australian literary studies—and how I teach it in a way that engages students.

As with many of the students involved in this trial, I had no previous experience working with multimedia in an educational context; we were all, in essence, novices. Indeed, I would consider myself a “late-adopter” of technological innovations. Innovation takes time. And when one is in the early stages of an academic career, and focused as much on building confidence with disciplinary content as with pedagogical convention, introducing unfamiliar teaching techniques involves substantial risks. Without the financial and logistical support provided by the university to undertake training and facilitate the students’ training, and without the assistance furnished by the university’s teaching and learning institute and the faculty’s flexible education support team, it is unlikely that I would have introduced the digital narrative project in the manner that I did. Support—highly focused, well-prepared, and organized—has been fundamental to the success of this implementation project. The benefit of well-planned student support in the initial phase of the project resulted in a markedly lower level of support requested by students in the second year. By the end of the first year of the trial the tools and protocols that had been originally prepared had been tested and, where necessary, modified; and a body of locally-produced exemplars of students’ work was available to inform the second year group. In short, the investment of effort in establishing digital narrative within the unit’s teaching and learning framework in the first year paved the way for a smoother implementation in the second year.

Early observation of students in both years revealed a number of surprises. The first was learning of their anxiety in undertaking a novel activity. Both student cohorts were familiar with using computers, word processors, and digital phones, etc., but they were by no means *digital natives* (Prensky, 2001). While all felt confident in their skills using the Internet to retrieve information, most indicated that they had never used video production software like iMovie and that they “*usually use new technologies when most people [they] know do*”, rather than describing themselves as early adopters of technology. The concept of creating a short (3–5 minute) audiovisual presentation as a work of critical reflection was new to all the students. While it was obvious that the students felt nervous about undertaking this assessment task, they were nevertheless all willing to participate in the project—and as the commentary above reflects, a number of them appreciated the opportunity to exercise their creativity. They also appreciated the guidelines they were given as well as the way the digital narrative exercise aligned with the other learning tasks and objectives within the unit. Nevertheless, it was clear that students took some time to get into the activity. The progress of the project had been planned in stages, but some students found it difficult to keep up with the schedule. The students progressed at their own pace until it came time to

submit their work and a number were forced to rush to meet the deadline.

There were a number of challenges in the implementation of the digital narrative project. In the first year of implementation it was both time-consuming and resource intensive from a teaching perspective. One of the biggest issues related to the effective doubling of my workload in the first half of the semester. The unit is offered in Internal (face-to-face) and Distance (recorded lectures, etc) modes. Usually the lectures for Distance students are recorded in situ with the Internal students. However given the amount of time spent discussing the digital narrative project over the first few weeks of semester, separate lecture recordings were needed for distance students. Assessment was another significant issue. I was aware of the literature on this topic and the debates about aesthetic expectations. Should one expect students to create presentations that are of broadcast quality, or should examiners assess students' work using alternative aesthetic regimes that take into account the conditions under which the media was produced and the purposes of productions? Where possible I consulted and/or adapted (with permission) previously developed materials that were freely available on the Internet. For example, I directed students to examples of student produced digital narratives available through YouTube and other Internet services; and I used a criteria referenced assessment sheet from *Digital Storytelling: Tips and Resources* (Matthews-DeNatale, 2008) and adapted it with the permission of the original designer. Nevertheless, it was necessary to create a number of specific materials that were directly pertinent to the unit and institutional contexts, including information sheets. Furthermore, given the fact that this was the first iteration of this teaching method for the unit—and given the novelty of the process for students and teacher alike—I decided to give students the opportunity to resubmit their work once they had made adjustments to aspects of the work that I identified in my initial assessment. Although only a few students took up this offer it became a means of engaging students further in a productive conversation about their understandings of the unit's themes.

Although this was the first time digital narrative had been used in the unit, a number of benefits were noticed: first, the exercise provided a clear and practical scaffold for student work in the first half of semester; second, it provided a context for students to engage collaboratively; third, it encouraged students to work on a set assignment across a number of weeks; and fourth, it provided an explicit context for students to engage with issues relating to the unit's core themes and materials. This allowed students to engage with lecture material as part of their assignment, and provided for a continuous learning experience in line with the pedagogical aims of the project.

The exercise provided other potential benefits for learning purposes. Perhaps the key advantage was the way the exercise forced students to reveal their positions on critical issues in a manner that provided a clear context for student-teacher engagement. Two examples are relevant here. When student A was introduced to the exercise and asked to respond to the question, "*What does Australian literature mean to you?*" her first reaction was that she doesn't read Australian literature and therefore it means nothing to her. Undertaking the project forced her to reflect on the simple fact that many of the works of genre fiction on her home bookshelves were indeed written by Australian authors. This leads to an examination of the nature of Australian literature and how the consciousness of readers has been shaped by cultural and institutional practices and imperatives that qualify some works as *Australian* and *Literary* and other as not. The digital narrative project provided the student with a context in which to examine the topic in a manner that was relevant to her own position as a reader of forms of Australian writing that have been otherwise marginalized or ignored on educational syllabi of Australian literature. Student B produced a sophisticated digital narrative that addressed the question of the relationship between Australian novelists' use of characterisation. His short narrative provided a clear argument in relation to the way Australian literary culture favors certain stereotypes of character and situation. His narrative pointed to some of the biases one observes in Australian fiction. At the same time the student's use of male authors, as well as the images he chose of these authors, revealed his own biases towards Australian literary fiction and its values that called for further reflection and critique. As with Student A, the digital narrative provided both an outcome for Student B's critical reflections as well as a context for further work. This student's work clearly showed his ability to appreciate and apply the ideas that he had gained in the first part of the unit. It also demonstrated how the creation of a short script, and the demands that places on a writer, influenced the critical reflection essay. And it also revealed in verbal and well as visual modes aspects of the student's intellectual engagement with the task that called for development and refinement.

4. Discussion

Students were generous in making suggestions about potential ways to improve the digital narrative project, reflecting a perception of themselves as co-constructors of this innovative learning experience. Most suggestions were logistical and related to issues such as: encouraging future students to complete the script earlier, particularly prior to using the faculty's computer lab; alerting future students to the time-consuming (albeit

ultimately valuable) nature of the task; and making access to the faculty computer lab and the technical assistants available later in the semester, not just at the beginning. Students encouraged the lecturer to maintain the story circles as they found them valuable in providing guidance, particularly in relation to the *openness* of the question. In the first year, exemplars were also cited as being potentially useful in this regard. The student suggestions, then, were essentially refinements to what they considered a valuable learning experience.

One critical observation from this study, consistent with current Australian higher education demographics and policy (see Bradley et al., 2008), is that the majority of students are on campus only when required to attend class. This had direct implications for their readiness and capacity to alter their campus engagement routine. This will need to be highlighted to future students as an important time management consideration. Taking into account the changes suggested by students, the lecturer will also introduce a further stage to the project: after submitting the digital narrative to the lecturer, students will present the narrative to the class for discussion. Following this, they will have the opportunity to amend the narrative and then resubmit with the critical reflection essay in order to better facilitate the deep learning potential of digital narratives mentioned above.

In the next offering of the unit, distance students will be able to undertake the digital narrative project provided they can attend the technology workshop, or demonstrate to the lecturer that they have the requisite skills. Research shows that we cannot assume that all young tertiary students are *digital natives*. Lovell and Baker (2009) cite a number of studies that challenge Prensky's view on student attitudes towards and aptitudes with new media and computer technologies more generally and argue for a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon (see Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Toledo, 2007). Our findings support this view. Moreover, it is clear from the experiences with this cohort of students that ongoing technical support will remain a necessity.

4.1 Caveats

While the responses by students and lecturer support the conclusion that the digital narrative project had clear benefits for student learning, there are a number of factors that limit the generalisability of the study's results. These include the small sample size, as well as the potential conflict between the first named author's role as teacher, researcher and *trainee* digital narrative maker. Furthermore, there is a clear possibility that students' feedback, as well as the lecturer's impressions, were influenced by a Hawthorne effect: the situational bias that arises when participants are conscious of having their behaviour observed. The authors have attempted to address these issues by using multiple perspectives and approaches to the evaluation, by ensuring that the lecturer did not participate in the conduct or analysis of the focus group meetings, and by relating the findings to current literature of digital narratives/storytelling and higher education learning.

5. Conclusion

The present study reinforces existing views about the applicability and utility of digital narratives in higher education contexts. It is also the first study of its kind to examine the utility of digital narratives as learning and teaching tools in the discipline of Australian literature. While there are clear limitations on the generalisability of the results the responses by the students and lecturer provide encouragement to continue using this methodology.

The feedback from students suggests that the digital narrative project facilitated a deep learning experience for them. The reflections of the lecturer suggest refinements that could be made to further improve students' learning experiences. In particular, the student responses support the idea that the digital narrative facilitated an appreciation of how critical engagement with texts can be related to personal experience (Benmayor, 2008). As mentioned, the use of creative methods to facilitate critical intellectual engagement is by no means novel and the results of the study suggest the value of digital narratives towards supporting and attaining this goal.

This study also demonstrates the importance of effective training and support for academics who seek to implement innovative teaching practices. While the type of software required to create digital narratives has become widely available, the utilisation of such technology in the university classroom brings with it a host of issues. Technical support for students and teachers is vital if such technology is to be used effectively. Furthermore adequate preparation of resources, protocols and plans is also necessary. Amongst other things this study reinforces the utility and necessity of institutional-supported teaching development initiatives to drive innovation.

Acknowledgement

Funding to support the introduction of the digital narrative project, as well as for the evaluation of the implementation, was provided by the University of Tasmania through its Teaching Development Grant Scheme, in 2010. The authors thank the university, the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching, and the Faculty of Arts Flexible Education Office for their support of this project.

References

- ACARA (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority). *English Curriculum F–10*. Retrieved May 24, 2012 from <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/Curriculum/F-10>
- Barrett, H. (2006). *Researching and evaluating digital storytelling as a deep learning tool*. Retrieved August 31, 2008 from <http://electronicportfolios.org/portfolios/SITEStorytelling2006.pdf>
- Benmayor, R. (2008). Digital storytelling as a signature pedagogy for the new humanities. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 7(1), 188–204. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474022208088648>
- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (3rd ed.). Great Britain: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22(2), 151–167. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713695728>
- Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bull, G., & Kajder, S. (2005). Digital storytelling in the language arts classroom. *Learning and Leading with Technology*, 32(4), 46–49.
- Burgess, J. (2006). Hearing ordinary voices: Cultural studies, vernacular creativity and digital storytelling. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 20(2), 201–214. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304310600641737>
- Coventry, M. (2008a). Cross-currents of pedagogy and technology: A forum on digital storytelling and cultural critique—Introduction. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 7(2), 165–170. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474022208088646>
- Coventry, M. (2008b). Engaging gender: Student application of theory through digital storytelling. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 7(1), 205–219. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474022208088649>
- Dogan, B., & Robin, B. (2008). *Implementation of digital storytelling in the classroom by teachers trained in a digital storytelling workshop*. Retrieved from <http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/pdfs/Dogan-DS-Research-2008.pdf>
- Farnsworth, J., & Boon, B. (2010). Analysing group dynamics with the focus group. *Qualitative Research*, 10(5), 605–624. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1468794110375223>
- Ganley, B., & Vila, H. (2006). Digital stories in the Liberal Arts environment: Educational media communities at the margins. In B. Hipfl, & T. Hug (Eds.), *Media Communities* (pp. 321–336). New York: Waxmann.
- Havnes, A. (2008). Peer-mediated learning beyond the curriculum. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(2), 193–204. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075070801916344>
- Hydén, L., & Bülow, P. (2003). Who's talking? Drawing conclusions from focus groups—some methodological considerations. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 6(4), 305–321. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13645570210124865>
- Kajder, S., Bull, G., & Albaugh, S. (2005). Constructing digital stories. *Learning and Leading with Technology*, 32(5), 40–42.
- Klaebe, H., & Bolland, C. (2007). *Text meets technology*. Retrieved October 20, 2008 from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00010869/01/10869.pdf>
- Klaebe, H., Foth, M., Burgess, J., & Bilandzic, M. (2007). Digital storytelling and history lines: Community engagement in a master-planned development. *Proceedings 13th International Conference on Virtual Systems and Multimedia (VSMM'07)*, Brisbane.
- Leon, S. M. (2008). Slowing down, talking back, and moving forward: Some reflections on digital storytelling in the humanities curriculum. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 7(1), 220–223. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474022208088650>
- Lizzio, A., & Wilson, K. (2008). Feedback on assessment: Student's perceptions of quality and effectiveness. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(3), 263–275. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602930701292548>
- Lovell, S., & Baker, S. (2009). Digital narratives of youth transition. *Youth Studies Australia*, 28(4), 52–59.
- Mattews-DeNatale, G. (2008). *Digital storytelling: Tips and resources*. Retrieved March 4, 2010 from

- <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI08167B.pdf>
- Meadows, D. (2003). Digital storytelling: Research-based practice in new media. *Visual Communication*, 2(2), 189–193. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1470357203002002004>
- Mellon, C. A. (1999). Digital storytelling: Effective learning through the Internet. *Educational Technology*, 39(2), 46–50.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dilemmas of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nicol, D. (2010). From monologue to dialogue: Improving written feedback processes in mass higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(5), 501–517. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602931003786559>
- Oppermann, M. (2008). Digital storytelling and American Studies: Critical trajectories from the emotional to the epistemological. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 7(2), 171–187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474022208088647>
- Palfrey, J., & Gasser, U. (2008). *Born digital: Understanding the first generation of digital natives*. New York: Basic Books.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1–6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816>
- Robin, B. R. (2008). Digital storytelling: A powerful technology tool for the 21st-century classroom. *Theory into Practice*, 47(3), 220–228. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00405840802153916>
- Sadler, D. R. (2010). Beyond feedback: Developing student capability in complex appraisal. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(5), 535–550. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02602930903541015>
- Thomas, S., Joseph, C., Laccetti, J., Maon, B., Mills, S., Perril, S., & Pullinger, K. (2007). Transliteracy: Crossing divides. *First Monday*, 12(12). Retrieved December 14, 2010 from <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2060/1908>
- Toledo, C. (2007). Digital culture: Immigrants and tourists responding to the native’s drumbeat. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 19(1), 84–92.
- Tucker, G. (2006). First person singular: The power of digital storytelling. *Screen Education*, 42, 54–57.
- Weiss, T. M., Benmayor, R., O’Leary, C., & Enyon, B. (2002). Digital technologies and pedagogies. *Social Justice*, 29(4), 153–167.

Appendix A

Task description:

What does “Australian literature” mean to you? How does the experience of reading novels and poems, and viewing film reflect and/or influence your sense of who are and where you come from?

To answer this question you will create a short “digital story” using iMovie software. A digital story is a 3-5 minute audiovisual presentation. It will include still and/or moving images, as well as a soundtrack and/or voice over narration. You may already be familiar with such presentations through YouTube. You are free to be as creative as possible.

In addition to producing a Digital Narrative, you are required to produce a Critical Reflection Essay. Your Critical Reflection Essay will address a number of specific questions. These include:

1. Why did you choose to approach the questions set for the Digital Narrative Task in the way that you did?
2. How did the process of producing the Digital Narrative over five weeks influence the development of your ideas in relation to the set questions?
3. How does your Digital Narrative relate to the ideas that have been examined in the unit so far and to the primary and/or secondary texts that you have encountered?

Appendix B

Digital Narrative Project

(In this section “Digital Narrative” refers to the short audiovisual movie that you created; “Critical Reflection Essay” refers the reflective essay that you wrote in conjunction with the Digital Narrative; and “Digital Narrative Project” refers to the whole project, i.e. Digital Narrative and Critical Reflection Essay)

Table 1. Sufficient information was provided to me about the **Digital Narrative Project** at the start of semester

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 2. The aims of the **Digital Narrative** were clear

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 3. The aims of the **Critical Reflection Essay** were clear

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 4. Sufficient training was provided to me in the use of the software for the purpose of creating the **Digital Narrative**

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 5. Sufficient technical support was provided to assist me to complete my **Digital Narrative**

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 6. Sufficient time was provided in class to facilitate the production of the **Digital Narrative**

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 7. The expectations for the **Digital Narrative** were clearly reflected in the marking criteria sheet for this part of the project

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 8. The expectations for the **Critical Reflection Essay** were clearly reflected in the marking criteria sheet for this part of the project

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 9. The **Critical Reflection Essay** provided a good way of exploring in a deeper way the ideas and themes of my **Digital Narrative**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 10. My grade for the **Digital Narrative** reflects the time and energy that I devoted to this part of the **Digital Narrative Project**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 11. My grade for the **Critical Reflection Essay** reflects the time and energy that I devoted to this part of the **Digital Narrative Project**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 12. Appropriate feedback was provided on my completed **Digital Narrative Project**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 13. Producing the **Digital Narrative** helped me gain a deeper understanding of the assignment topic

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 14. Producing the **Digital Narrative** gave me a deeper understanding of Australian literature

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 15. The process of creating the **Digital Narrative** was enjoyable

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 16. The process of creating the **Digital Narrative** was challenging

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 17. Creating a **Digital Narrative** is a useful complement to written essay assignments

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 18. I am pleased with my **Digital Narrative**

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree Not Applicable

Table 19. I appreciated the chance to revise my **Digital Narrative**

| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 20. **Digital Narrative Projects** have a place in other Faculty of Arts units

| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 21. **Digital Narrative Projects** have a place in other University units

| <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Not Applicable</i> |
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|

Table 22. Satisfaction with the Digital Narrative Project as a whole: Thinking about the Digital Narrative Project as a whole—and considering all of the elements mentioned above—how satisfied are you with your experience undertaking the Digital Narrative Project?

| <i>Very Unsatisfied</i> | <i>Unsatisfied</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Satisfied</i> | <i>Very Satisfied</i> |
|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|
|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|