

Advanced Thinking in Digital Storytelling
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When word processors first came on the scene, teachers were happy to get typed papers from students and were willing to overlook minor transgressions in technology and writing. However, word processing has become so efficient that expectations have significantly risen. The same phenomenon is occurring with the production of digital stories. Initially, the concept was so thrilling, that any product was viewed as a “masterpiece.” But now, teachers and students are becoming more savvy in the teaching and creation of digital stories.

Advanced Thinking DOES NOT mean more technology. The creation of superior digital stories lies more in metacognition than in manipulation. Most editing software comes equipped with a plethora of transitions, visual and audio effects, background music and text styles. When turned loose on all these choices, many students cram as many effects as humanly possible into their three-minute story. When asked why, students usually shrug their shoulders and respond “They look cool.” I have adopted two theories that have greatly enhanced the quality of stories. First, my students can use effects, as long as they understand and can justify *why* each effect is used. The second is simply “Less is more.” Developing awareness of each effect is the key.

Movement (panning and zooming) can add dynamic movement to still shots and can aid in developing plot, revealing character, or creating a dramatic effect. Since I only allow stills in DST projects, I encourage the use of movement judiciously. The first step is to teach the effect of each movement. Next, is to create an awareness of the interplay between movement and narration. Usually, most student-generated movement is far too fast. Subtle and slow is the way to go. *Slow zoom out* gives an object a sense of place or setting. It also gradually reveals information that can be intriguing to the viewer. *Slow zoom in* gently focuses the viewer and draws attention to a particular object or person. Carefully coordinating the zoom with narration is critical. Occasionally, a *quick zoom in* can add a dramatic effect that abruptly jerks the audience to pay attention to something on the screen. *Panning* has a different effect than zooming. A pan creates an illusion of a storyboard, revealing information as it coincides with the narration. Again, slow is usually better. One note: most times, a left-to-right pan is preferred. Use right to left only to create an “uncomfortable” effect for the viewer. This phenomenon stems from the fact that our eyes have been trained to move left to right from years of reading. Right to left is unnatural to our eyes. Of course the variety of movement is endless. Always have students reflect on the purpose for each movement.

Transitions can be a real trap. Remember those Powerpoints with a different transition for each slide? The truth is, most transitions are distracting. The key is teaching the purpose of the “Big Three” and show students how to choose. I tell students to think of transitions as punctuation marks. *A cut* (or no transition) is like *no* punctuation, or at most, a comma. *A dissolve* (or a cross fade) is like a period. *A fade to black* is closest to an “enter” or a new paragraph, suggesting a change in thought or time passing--the longer the black, the longer the ellipsis. One the rare occasion, a more complex transition can be effective. I saw one story, where a student used vertical bars coming down to transition to someone ending up in a jail cell. The key is, he had a reason for doing it, and, incidentally, it was the *only* other complex transition he used; he was aware of the meaning the transition conveyed.

Decisions about sound range from voice over considerations to soundtrack and yes even sound effects. One of the first areas I focus on with regards to voice over is the avoidance of redundancy. I have students spend time editing stories to make sure that they eliminate words that convey meaning that is already conveyed with an image. There is no need to describe the color of the ocean if the picture is there. The other consideration is pacing. First students need to slow down to allow viewers time to process images. Second, nothing adds more to meaning than to start the voice over at least one full second after the image appears. Again this allows the viewer time to process the information. I tell students, “You know your story, but your audience does not.” *Soundtrack* first rule: instrumentals only. Lyrics tend to distract away from the narration—the heart of the story. One thing to keep in mind: it is not *essential* to have music throughout the story. A break in music can add drama to a piece, especially at the turning point in the story. Students also want to know if it is beneficial to use several different songs in a story. Once again, I go back to asking them *why* and to emphasize the “less is more” philosophy.

Other factors such as titles, text, split screens, and image augmentation (sepias, negatives, etc) are other

considerations. Keep in mind, that true digital storytelling is a *writing* experience bolstered by images and sound. If we focus more on good writing and the essence of sharing the story, then the technology becomes a tool and not the focus.

Jon Orech is available for on-site workshops on Digital Storytelling
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