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Digital Storytelling : Creative Writing as a Form of Participation in Literary Culture

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DIGITAL STORYTELLING: CREATIVE WRITING AS A FORM OF PARTICIPATION IN LITERARY CULTURE

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. All media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical.

(McLuhan et al. 1967: 26)

Digital storytelling on the website Lubimyczytac.pl contributes to an increase in the reading public, to active participation in literary discourse, and to the change of passive consumers of popular culture into active agents of the field of literature. With the use of the anthropological approach and the tool of virtual ethnography, one sub-segment of this website is investigated to find out how one communication media (printed books) enhances both creative writing and reading itself, and how the latter cultural pattern is promoted.

Keywords: media, digital storytelling, creative writing, competition, award, promotion

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this article is storytelling in the form it could appear only in the 20th and 21st centuries with the use of the most advanced media of communication: the internet and other digital tools. However, storytelling has accompanied human beings since they have been able to use language to communicate with one another. At the very beginning, they created songs to enchant natural phenomena which allegedly would lurk or threaten them with obscurity, and to win their favour, or simply to explain them. The result was magic storytelling, spells, incantations, mythology peopled with humans of superhuman qualities, religious myths aimed

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at worship of gods, and countless secular stories whose task was to remember and preserve the knowledge of the time (medical, historical, biographical) which was to be transmitted to the following generations to expand their body of knowledge and perpetuate traditions.

What is a story? Modern definitions of the story usually follow the one coined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. For this philosopher, plot is the core of a story. It is even more important than characters. Moreover, it has to consist of a sequence of events causally related to one another:

Plots are either simple or complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition. A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both. These last should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of propter hoc or post hoc (translated by Butcher 2000: 15).

Definitions of this form of human cultural expression are numerous and embedded in a given stage of anthropological reflection and studies. Generally speaking “a *story* is a sequence of content, anchored on a problem, which engages [...] the audience with emotion and meaning. Breaking this down, *audience* is a crucial definitional component, simply because what makes a story for one group might fail utterly for another” (Alexander 2011:13). In his definition Alexander refers to the broadly accepted concept of Gustav Freytag, a nineteenth-century German novelist, who noticed common patterns in the *plots* of dramas, epics and novels and developed a diagram to show that the story usually consists of a sequence of exposition or introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and a dénouement (Fig. 1).

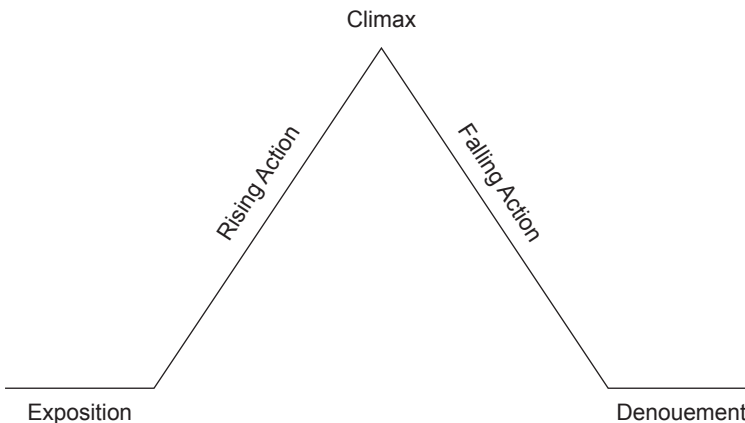


Figure 1. Gustav Freytag’s model of a plot in fictive stories

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dramatic_structure

So, the linear nature of stories is crucial to many definitions. Another essential characteristic of any story is its meaning. To put it briefly, stories are meaning-vehicles that attempt to engage the audience: “A *story* is the narrative, or telling, of an event or series of events, crafted in a way to interest the audiences, whether they are readers, listeners, or viewers” (Bernard 2007: 15).

The question which matters to this article is whether there exist any distinctive differences between fictional and non-fictional stories. Alexander finds any definite answers to this question disputable as, according to him, sheer storytelling is also present in “marketing used to sell a product’s story; the mini-stories so essential to any discussion of ethics; the use of storytelling for surfacing implicit information in knowledge-management practice” (Alexander 2011: 12).

Storytelling is innate and natural for anyone, but only a gifted few are able to win the status of entertainer: a storyteller. The role of the storyteller has changed over time depending on the media used to mediate the relationship between story-givers and story-takers, and the history of this relationship goes back to magic, Homeric or bardic traditions. Whatever the time, the importance of storytelling cannot be overestimated: “Not only can it transport the audience on a thrilling journey into an imaginary world, but it can also reveal dark secrets of human nature or inspire the audience with the desire to do noble deeds. Storytelling can also be pressed into service for more utilitarian goals: to teach, to promote, and to train” (Ryan 2004: 9).

And finally, the memory of tradition enclosed in stories that connect the past, the present and the future was (and is) a strong factor that affects collective identity and cohesion of social groups, be they primitive tribes or post-modern communities.

SHORT HISTORY OF STORYTELLING AND THE AUDIENCES’ APPROACH TO THE MESSAGE

ORAL STORYTELLING

As mentioned above, the history of storytelling is based on the mode of presentation. Such an approach enables us to embed digital storytelling within a tradition that stretches back to the mist of preliterate times, when storytellers had only one medium at their disposal: the spoken language. The most striking characteristic of this ancient form of storytelling is the intimacy between the teller and listeners: a collective reception of messages. Another feature of these early stories is their universal nature. George Frazer once tried to discover how it was possible for certain motifs to appear in legends and myths of nations thousands of kilometres apart. He argued that it may have resulted from universality of human experience irrespective of time and space (Frazer 1978).

Undoubtedly, there were two other factors that contributed to this phenomenon: ancient storytellers were nomads and their stories travelled with them. When they returned home, they brought with them exciting new tales of exotic places, events and people. The unrecorded stories were very flexible in their form and content. They were memorized and transferred to subsequent generations enriched with the storytellers’ imagination and adapted to the needs

of new audiences. One thing has still not changed: stories were (and are) the most popular form of entertainment and human communication. However, even though the relationship between tellers and listeners was not yet mediated by any artificial tool of communication, and despite the emotional involvement of the audience listening to more or less thrilling stories, their participation in this form of culture was fundamentally passive, as shown in this model of oral storytelling:

teller > medium: oral message > passive listener.

The oldest surviving tale in the history of storytelling is the epic *Gilgamesh*, which gives an account of the life and deeds of a famous Sumerian king.

ALPHABETIC AND ANALOGUE STORYTELLING

The first medium to mediate the relationship between storytellers and their listeners were systems of writing hereinafter called alphabets. The history of alphabetic writing goes back to the system of signs used by Semitic tribes as early as the 2nd millennium B.C., which became the ancestor of writing systems accepted in the Middle East, Europe, and northern Africa (Egypt). The first true Greek alphabet was imported from the Phoenicians around the 8th century BC, and Latin, the most widely used alphabet today, was adopted from the Greek in about the 7th century. Western and central Europe began using Roman letters as it converted to Christianity, or to be more exact to Roman Catholicism, in the 6th century (Robinson 1995: 170).

The new medium was not readily accepted, as it was alleged to be useless or even harmful, and it was the intellectual elites of ancient Greece that initially had most objections to the invention which was to dominate human communication. One of them was Plato:

The discovery of the alphabet will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves... You give your disciples not truth but only the semblance of truth; they will be heroes of many things, and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing (Phaedrus: 274b–278e).

However, the new medium soon proved indispensable to record the growing body of messages (both fictional and non-fictional narrations), and in its printed form (the Gutenberg Galaxy) it exists and thrives up to today, all the more so that all the new media which emerged with the Industrial Revolution and later on owe their very existence to the alphabet. And like Plato, the cultural elites warned the public against photography which was to destroy painting, against television which was to erode film, etc. Nothing like this has ever happened, and the so-called analogue media co-exist peacefully as a still-active part of cultural heritage. What all these media have in common is that they are used by writers, poets, playwrights, and others to tell stories: “Historians, biographers, journalists, psychoanalysts are all involved in narration, as are, at least some of the time, lawyers, scientists, sports commentators, and people in pubs” (Nash 1990: 134) as “narration of any kind involves the recounting and shaping of events” (Lamarque 1990: 11).

Another common feature of analogue and alphabetic media is that aside from in some incidental situations (letters to writers, call-in television programmes) they generally offer one-way messages. As modern anthropologists and sociologists claim, it is a one-to-many message. In other words, besides some form of contact which emerges between the author of a message and its addressee, or even the bond which may result while consuming the message, the participation of the audience in an alphabetic and analogue model of storytelling is fundamentally passive:

sender > medium non-digital message (text, photography, audio and video broadcasts) > passive addressee.

Thus, interactivity, if any, is rather limited.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING

What is digital storytelling? “Simply put, it is telling stories with digital technologies. Digital stories are narratives built from the stuff of cyberculture” (Alexander 2011: 16). The content of the stories is as diverse as the tools used to create them. Thus it could be a sequence of photographs that create a story about gardening, a podcast presenting some historical event built with the use of internet sources, a blog on women talking about their cancer trauma, novels read on mobile phones or listened to on audio-books, video accounts of weddings – all of these are put on the internet for other people to see and respond. The basic difference between oral, analogue and digital storytelling is that in the last the “sender” evolves into “senders” (the message is sent from many-to-many), and an “addressee” transforms into a “sender” in the process of interaction. Therefore, what we have to deal with in digital storytelling is interaction. As a result a model of digital storytelling could be perceived in this way:

senders > medium: digital message (internet + analogous media) > active addressee-senders

HISTORY OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Digital storytelling goes back to the first computer networks. According to Alexander it is vital “to think historically on this topic, rather than viewing digital storytelling as something utterly new, alien, or freshly emergent, because it helps describe emerging practices by analysing long-term trends grounded in the historical record” (Alexander 2011: 17). He divides this history into two main stages: the first wave of digital storytelling and the new wave of digital storytelling, and his classification is based on the emergence of new resources available on the internet.

In text-based games and interactive fiction stories (IF), first launched in the late 1970s, participants interacted with virtual worlds and other players via a keyboard using simple commands, such as “go home”, “take a jug”, or “swim across the stream”. In the story *Adventure* (1975) created by a programmer and spelunker, players explore a vast cave, find hidden objects, solve puzzles and meet other characters. Unlike in games, they do not focus solely on scoring points but on a narrative and quest. Stories were co-creations, partially determined by the audience (Alexander 2011:19).

Table 1. History of digital storytelling

Prehistory 1960s–1970s – appearance of pre-internet text-based games (Space War and early Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs))				
FIRST WAVE OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING				
Timeframe	Hardware	Software	Virtual communities	Examples
1980s–1990	Personal computers, Floppy discs	Internet, Hypercard, Storyspace, Notepad, Dreamweaver, Outlook express	e-mail digital gaming – MUD & MOO hypertext IF (interactive fiction) World Wide Web	“The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973), “True Names” (1981); William Gibson’s <i>Neuromancer</i> (1984)
1991–2004	CD Mp3	URL naming syntax <i>http</i> (Hyper Text Transfer Protocol)	World Wide Web	<i>Ted’s Caving Journal</i> <i>The Jew’s Daughter</i> , <i>Lexia to Perplexia</i> , <i>Grammatron</i> , <i>Zoeye</i>
NEW WAVE OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING				
Time frame	Hardware	Software	Virtual communities	Examples
2004>	smart phones laptops tablets pendrives	Google, Chrome, Firefox Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) Netscape Composer Dreamweaver file transfer protocol (FTP) Outlook email	Web 2.0 (and on) Social media	Wikipedia Facebook Twitter

Source: Alexander 2011: 11–41

Another interesting early IF story is *Ted’s Caving Journal*, a mock journal of a spelunker who explores an ominous underground structure. It consists of ten black static pages dated 2000 and 2001, and contains a few paragraphs of text and photographs and a simple navigational menu. All of a sudden the navigation ends on page ten, as if something horrible happened to the spelunker and he was unable to complete the journal (Fig. 2).

The rise of hypertext fiction is an important event in the history of digital storytelling. Hypertext had its precursors, among them the Talmud, the Bible or dictionaries and encyclopaedias which use intricate systems to arrange annotations on the primary text. For readers of printed fiction, the best known examples are Julio Cortazar’s *Hopscotch* (1963), Jorge Luis Borges’ *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1978), and James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939) (see Eco 1998, Murray 1995).

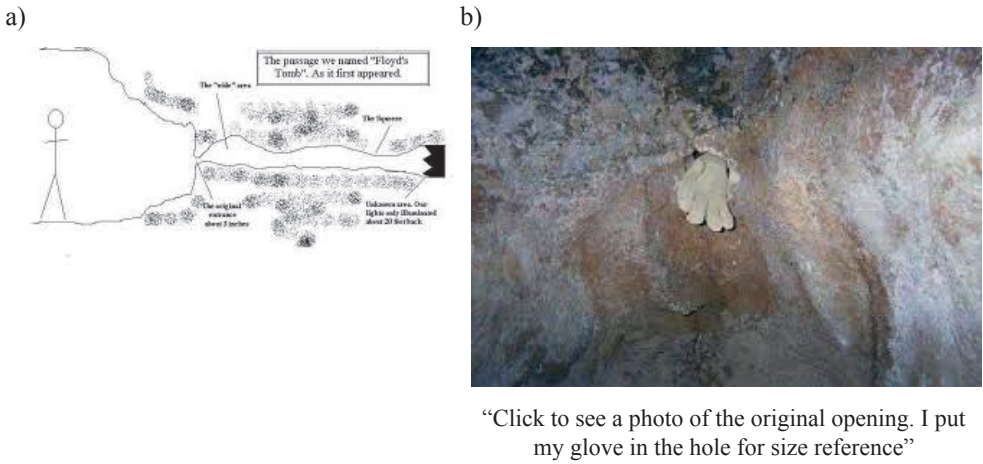


Figure 2. The plan of the cave Ted explored (a). The photo of his glove allegedly lost in the cave (b)

Source: <https://www.google.pl/search?q=tod%27s+caving+journal&oq=Ted+'+s+Caving+Journal&aqs>

The term itself was coined by Ted Wilson as early as 1963. Hypertexts consisted of two elements: content items (*lexia*) and their connections or links positioned on a computer screen and activated with a click of a mouse, which allows the reader to progress in the story or develop it. Hypertext does not need to be just an alphabetic linear text. Instead it is a hyper-structured text with other structures (images, graphic representations of the text, video clips, scrolling pages etc.). Stories would be published via floppy disk.

However, the largest hypertext project started in 1991 with the World Wide Web, which gave an opportunity for personal content to flow into the internet: "That emphasis on transformation is the key to understanding the power of the digital storytelling creative experience. Participants can feel that their relationship to media, technology, memory, and themselves has been revitalized or defamiliarized, made fresh again..." (Alexander 2011: 24). The Everyman's creative needs required professional support and encouragement, which resulted in the mushrooming of Centres for Digital Storytelling (CDS).¹

New technologies offered the necessary environment for the rise of "Web 2.0". The term, coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004, survived for another few years untouched or used interchangeably with the term "social media". Media researchers defined some new trends that have developed in virtual reality in the 21st century: micro-content (podcasts, pdfs, videos), social architecture (My Space, LinkedIn, Facebook), and new platforms. Micro-content proved to be a very friendly environment for numerous digital story tellers, and social architecture provided tools used to communicate (blogs) and participate in it through editing, adding

¹ For the spread of CDS movement, curricula of the workshops and the most interesting effects see Alexander pp. 24–30 (2011).

comments, updating, likes and dislikes, and chatting, not to mention the websites where users collect and rank stories.

Digital story telling proves, and is a vital contributing factor to, the important cultural phenomenon of media divergence, so

it would be as foolish to consider contemporary storytelling without dwelling on gaming as to describe storytelling without movies, the spoken word, or print. [...] Films began by referencing print fiction, and fiction went on to return the favour. TV, books, movies, and oral traditions are audience touchstones for presenters, teachers, and other storytellers, offering points of personal connection and cultural resonance; we should now add games to that referential list (Alexander 2011: 40).

Given this article's focus on digital storytelling, the ways that domains of printed and digital stories overlap each other and how they coincide and provide for interactivity which, unlike their oral and analogue predecessors "digital storytellers, the newcomers in this long line of narrative artists, have [...] in their toolkit [...] Interactivity affects not only the craft of storytelling, but the experience of audience as well" (Marie-Laure Ryan 2004:12).

It is generally assumed that digital stories are narratives built from the stuff of cyberculture. However, for the stories written by participants in the literary discourse which one can observe in discussion groups of the website Lubimyczytac.pl, the narratives are inspired and built from the alphabetic stuff: printed books from which the stories are derived. To be more exact, it is not typical fan fiction. They are quite new stories built "on commission" of the group moderators who then choose the most interesting ones and award their authors with copies of the novel being promoted through that competition.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach accepted in this article is that of virtual ethnography, which as such includes numerous methods that follow ethnographic research tools to study the content and agents active on the internet. Thus, the author tries to describe a tiny fraction of the limitless virtual space by applying some known research techniques and thus takes it as a traditional field site. However, it soon becomes obvious that such a venture is very limited due to the immensity and changeability of the selected field site. One of the suggested solutions to this problem is basic ethnographic fieldwork and an account of computer-mediated interactions at a given time and place. Therefore observation or participant observation seems the safest option, provided one remembers and acknowledges that any statistical data easily accessible on the internet are very temporary. At any rate, virtual ethnography has been accepted as a useful tool to study virtual cultures and communities, and some principles and recommendations have been suggested for its potential users: 1. We can use ethnography to investigate the ways in which the use of the internet becomes socially meaningful; 2. interactive media such as the internet can be understood as both culture and cultural artefact; 3. the ethnography of mediated interaction often asks researchers to be mobile both virtually and physically; 4. instead of going to particular field sites, virtual ethnography follows field connections; 5. boundaries, especially between the "virtual" and the "real", are not to be taken

for granted; 6. virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long term immersion; 7. virtual ethnography is necessarily partial, therefore our accounts can be based on strategic relevance to particular research questions rather than faithful representations of objective realities; 8. intensive engagement with mediated interaction adds an important reflexive dimension to ethnography; 9. this is ethnography *of, in* and *through* the virtual – we learn about the Internet by immersing ourselves in it and conducting our ethnography using it, as well as talking with people about it, watching them use it and seeing it manifest in other social settings; and 10. virtual ethnography is, ultimately, an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself (Hine 2000: 66).

Hine's guidelines were taken into consideration while carrying out observation of a small segment of the website Lubimyczytac.pl, and even this small segment could be reported in the present article only partially. The advantage of the website as a source of information is that the data are carefully archived, and although overall current statistics concerning the website are constantly changing the archived information is left untouched. Following Hine's advice, discussions on the website under study are treated as place of performance (a discussion group of a competitive character) and performed spaces, that is, the body of stories written by participants.

And last but not least, it should be emphasized that the whole website is a business venture which subsists on advertising services. These services are, however, of a double character. On the one hand, they are purely commercial (a source of income coming from promotion of given publishing houses, bookshops, and other market artefacts). On the other hand, the website stimulates interest in reading through promoting the advertised "product": the book, as it is promoted through competitions for authors of digital stories inspired by that book (mostly printed but also e-books and audio-books) with the winners awarded printed copies. Considering this advertising technique we may argue that the website's owners apply so-called intelligent marketing in which storytelling is an increasingly crucial factor. Marketing experts have realized that special effects and even the most aggressive commercials are less effective than story commercials that somehow meet the deeply rooted human need to be entertained through telling and listening to stories, including those about the product whose potential buyers they may become.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING COMPETITIONS: "WIN THE STORY FOR A STORY"

As mentioned above, the main task of the present article is to show digital storytelling as a form of active participation in literary discourse. It is based on the empirical virtual ethnography research carried out in 2012–2013 applying the observation technique. The object of the study is one of the discussion groups of the website Lubimyczytac.pl. This section of the website was presented as a place of performance, a specific space of storytellers' activity, and as performed spaces – stories which are written in particular competitions (<http://lubimyczytac.pl/grupy>).

The website is a business company, a typical hypertext (lexias and links) and a virtual community of people who read books and love them. At the end of 2013, when the empirical observation was completed, the community (besides the staff of the company) consisted of 356,000 logged-in participants who had written over 633,000 opinions, reviews or stories based on or linked to 216,000 recommended, presented, and advertised books (fiction narratives mainly).

On the final day of the observation the discussion group of review and story writers consisted of almost 31,000 readers who had written 32,916 messages. The main task of the competition is to write a story based on or related to the problems or plots of books in print. The awards are sponsored by the publishers or bookshops that release and distribute them. For the purposes of the present article we focus on digital stories only. A new competition lasts one week. Each competitor can send only one story. The stories must be original and not previously published on the internet or elsewhere. Authors cannot “borrow” from other sources. The stories are usually expected to be not longer than 2,000 to 2,500 characters. The jury of the competition consists of representatives of the website’s administration. Their decision is irrevocable. The participants have to have an address in Poland. The address of the winner is sent within two weeks from the end of a given competition and can be used only by the website or a publisher that sponsors the award. If the winner fails to provide the address, another winner is selected or the award is not granted at all. Writing a story was the main object of 73 competitions.

Table 2. Competitions “win the story for a story”

No	Author, title, publisher, year	Competition and its task (approx. number of stories)
10	J. Thorwald, <i>Royal Blood</i> , Znak 2010	Fighting a disease > a story of fighting a disease & defeating it (20)
11	K. Mirek, <i>Emotional Contest</i> , Feeria 2013	Emotional contest > a story about contradiction between laziness and diligence, love and hatred, etc. (20)
16	E. Herezińska, <i>The Crown of Snow and Blood</i> , Zysk i S-ka 2013	Sing for the kings > a victory song heralding the achievements of King Krzywousty (10 poems)
18	P. Coelho, <i>Valkirias</i> , Drzewo Babel 2010	Memorable events > write about wonderful journeys and events
19	A. Adamczyk, <i>All Sunsets Are Different</i> , iSource 2013	The light of a magic lantern > “Life without love is a magic lantern without light” – comment (20)
21	J.T. Bengston, <i>Submarino</i> , Czarne 2011	Literary images of cities > portrait of an impressive city (40)
22	A. Steinhöfel, <i>Rico, Oscar and Deep-Shadows</i> , WAM 2011	Children’s friendships > write a story (40)

Table 2 cont.

26	R. Kurkiewicz, <i>Ideas Turning Left</i> , Krytyka Polityczna 2011	The world according to me > a column article about something which intrigued or annoyed you recently (40)
26	Ch. Harris, <i>Shakespeare's landlord</i> , Znak 2011	Rubbish clearing > write a story how our rubbish discloses our folkways and secrets (40)
26	U. Eco, <i>Cemetery in Prague</i> , Noir sur Blanc 2011	The Protocols of the Elders of Zion > oration for or against authors of this work (40)
27	T. Słomczyński, <i>Ask the Hedgehog and Other Stories</i> , Area 2011	In the eye of a reporter > become your community reporter (40)
28	I. Adler, <i>Sherlock, Lupin and Me. The Trio of the Black Dame</i> , Zielona Sowa 2013	Shared adventure > a story of a riddle you could solve with help from your friends (40)
29	F. Flagg, <i>A Redbird Christmas</i> , Nowa Proza 2011	Strangers at Christmas Eve table > a story about unusual company you happened to spend Christmas with (40)
29	M.W. Turner, <i>The Queen of Attolia</i> , Ars Machina 2012	To outfox the queen > as a hired hand negotiate a very high price for recovery of a precious object stolen from the queen (40)
33	M. Ardit, <i>Turquetto</i> , Noir sur Blanc 2013	Life in Venice > one day of a Renaissance gondolier (40)
34	J. Walla, <i>Half Broke Horses</i> , Remi 2012	Be the woman, be the woman > a world without males (40)
34	Ch. Tsiolkas, <i>The Slap</i> , Replika 2012	Innocent slap > write a speech for or against (40)
34	Ł. Orbitowski, <i>Phantoms</i> , Wydawnictwo Literackie 2012	Alternative history > alternative version of a historical event (40)
35	M. Zielke, <i>The Sentence</i> , Czarna Owca 2012	Defending a criminal > defence oration for the fraud (40)
36	M. Bulhakov et al., <i>The Diary of Master and Margaret</i> , Muza 2013	Interviewing Margaret > a 15-minute interview (40)
36	A. Steinhöfel, <i>Rico, Oscar and a Broken Heart</i> , WAM 2012	Small detectives > child's detective adventures (40)
36	W.B. Cameron, <i>A dog's purpose</i> , Illuminatio 2012	Dog's friendship > story about your quadruped friend (40)
37	S. Emling, <i>Marie Curie and her Daughters</i> , Muza 2013	Aaa, two atoms > a lullaby with "chemical" words (radium, polonium, etc.) (40)
38	M. Stuhr, <i>In a Distorting Mirror</i> , Zwierciadło 2013	To work in a cabaret > a skit whose main hero is a literary character (40)
40	J. Rudiš, <i>Punk's dead in Helsinki</i> , Czeskie Klimaty 2013	Punk's Not Dead > manifesto: objection (or acceptance) to consumerism (20)
40	J. Szamałek, <i>The Inhospitable Sea</i> , Muza 2013	Bloody Olympus > a detective story up Olympus (20)

Table 2 cont.

No	Author, title, publisher, year	Competition and its task (approx. number of stories)
41	P. Smith, <i>Just Kids</i> , Czarne 2012	Let the sun shine in > a day in New York of 1967 (60)
41	J. Kerouac et al., <i>The Letters</i> , Czarne 2012	People write letters > a letter from a famous writer (60).
41	J. Coetzee, <i>The Childhood of Jesus</i> , Znak 2013	Still in the cradle ... > an apocrypha of Jesus as a child (60)
41	E.M. Staal, <i>Enquire in a Mortuary</i> , Feeria 2013	Daily chores of a weapons dealer > the son misbehaves at school, the car is blocked by a traffic warden... (60)
43	H. Wayne, <i>The Story of a Marriage: The Letters of Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson</i> , Muza 2012	The Sexual Life of Savages > a letter on Librophiles of the Literary Island (60)
44	R. Maciag, <i>One thousand cups of tea. Meetings along the silk route</i> , Bezdroża 2012	At tea time > sipping tea is extremely inspiring (60)
44	J. Carroll, <i>The Woman Who Married a Cloud</i> , Rebis 2012	Magic and mundane days > magic can appear anywhere and everywhere (60)
47	J. Ćwiek, <i>The Boys</i> , SQN 2013	Death suits you > a story that ends up in death (60)
48	A. Plichota et al., <i>Oxa Pollock. The Heart of the Two Worlds</i> , Czarna Owca 2012	Parallel worlds > image of the collateral world you would live in (without Columbus, Hitler, but with pagan gods?) (60)
50	A. Zentner, <i>Touch</i> , Wiatr od Morza 2013	Crime and punishment > "all crime shall be punished" (60)
51	V. Varesi, <i>Rooms to let</i> , Rebis 2012	Lodging > a story of renting a room with strangers, and... (60)
51	N. Reichter, <i>The Last Confession</i> , Novae Res 2013	Literary celebrities > a tabloid article about a fictive character
51	M. Krajewski, <i>Dark Abyss</i> , Znak 2013	Philosophy of crime > crime according to the principles of: stoicism, existentialism, de-construction, or nihilism etc. (60)
54	V. Woolf, <i>A Haunted House</i> , Wydawnictwo Literackie 2012	Experimental writing > a stream of consciousness story (60)
54	P. Robb, <i>Midnight in Sicily</i> , Czarne 2013	In claws of the mafia > you wake up and find a shellback thorn off the book you bought at a huge price. Continue... (60)
56	E. Camden, <i>The Rose of Winslow, Street</i> , Otwarte 2013	The language of flowers > a story of communication through flowers (60)
56	P. Rankov, <i>It happened on September 1 or Some other time</i> , Słowackie Klimaty 2013	Great history > Comment on the modern historical event which affected you most (60)

Table 2 cont.

58	M.W. Turner, <i>The Thief</i> , Ars Machina 2012	Story of a thief > larceny as a way to prison (60)
58	A. Prokopiev, <i>A Little Man. Left Pocket Fairy Tales</i> , Toczka 2012	A tale about the end of the year > It was... (60)
62	M. Paterson, <i>The Monks and Me</i> , Illuminatio 2013	The place on the Earth > making sense of your fate (80)
63	J. Gimlette, <i>Wild Coast. Travels on South</i> , Czarne 2013	Journey for one smile > a story about your wildest adventure (80)
64	K. Michalak, <i>A Cherry Cottage</i> , Wydawnictwo Literackie 2012	Name with its own history > a story behind the name (80)
66	L. Gallego, <i>Where Trees Sing</i> , Dreams 2013	A song for the tree > a song which trees would like to sing (80)
66	J. Green, <i>Paper Towns</i> , Bukowy Las 2013	Legend about my town > a founding legend of the town (80)
66	W. Myśliwski, <i>The Last Deal</i> , Znak 2013	Extra life > a short essay about life and time (80)
67	L. Rastello, <i>Super Smuggler</i> , Czarne 2013	How to smuggle tons of books? > the world without books (80)
69	A. Larsson, <i>Solar Gale</i> , Wydawnictwo Literackie 2013	Weather to kill > a detective story in very nice weather (80)
71	R. Ligocka, <i>A Good Child</i> , Wydawnictwo Literackie 2012	A diary page > being a teenager is not simple (80)
72	S. Marwer, <i>Trapeze. The Girl Who Fell from the Sky</i> , Znak 2013	The Spy > a profile of a British spy in occupied Poland (80)
76	R. Naam, <i>Nexus</i> , Drageus 2013	The life under influence > one day of a nano-drug addict (80)
77	D. Gee, <i>Friendship Bread</i> , Prószyński i S-ka 2011	Gestures of friendship > meeting future close friends (80)
79	H. Cygler, <i>The Colour of Amber</i> , Rebis 2013	Seaside moods > a story with the sea in the background (80)
79	A. Pérez-Reverte, <i>The Tango of the Old Guard</i> , Znak 2013	Dancing about love > a dialog between the two dancers: a man and woman (80)
80	M. Sośnicki, <i>The Two Modżiburki</i> , MTM 2011	Hymn for love > a story or a poem whose topic is love (80)
84	W. Sorokin, <i>Snowstorm</i> , Czarne 2013	Chats with the Giant > a dialogue in a snow storm (100)
84	F. Cataluccio, <i>Chernobyl</i> , Czarne 2013	Interior monologue > an interior monologue shortly before atomic disaster (100)
88	A. Munro, <i>Dear Life</i> , Wydawnictwo Literackie 2013	A letter to Life > expressing happiness (100)

Table 2 cont.

No	Author, title, publisher, year	Competition and its task (approx. number of stories)
89	K. Powers, <i>Yellow Birds</i> , Insignis 2013	It is difficult to write about war > a poem starting with the words: "The war tried to kill us in spring..." (100)
89	M.I. Niemczyńska, <i>Mrożek. Striptease of a Neurotic</i> , Agora 2013	A letter to yourself > we write truth only in letters to ourselves (100)
91	B. Sparks, <i>Go Ask Alice</i> , Remi 2012	One day in life > a story of one day in the life of an addict (100)
100	K. Lankers, <i>Elfin's Glimpse</i> , Dreams 2013	I am an elfin > an image & life of an elfin (100)
104	V. Rossi, <i>Under the Never Sky</i> , Moondrive 2013	Where do we live > the world behind the glass wall (120)
104	P. Heller, <i>The Dog Stars</i> , Insignis 2013	A recluse > fate of few survivals of total disaster (120)
106	S. King, <i>Dr. Sleep</i> , Prószyński i S-ka 2013	Just fall asleep > and you'll cross to the other side... (120)
110	K. Webb, <i>The Legacy</i> , Insignis 2012	Perfect memory > your earliest childhood recollections (120)
117	R. Masello, <i>The Romanov Cross</i> , Feeria 2013	A Spanish flu > infectious virus kills people: write a blog (120)
123	R. Adwent, <i>A Year at the Verge of the Earth</i> Feeria 2013	A safe place > describe the place where you feel quiet, relaxed and safe (140)
124	S. King, <i>Joyland</i> , Prószyński i S-ka 2013	Nightmarish fan park > a spooky story in such a place (140)

In every competition, storytelling is inspired by a book: the topics of the stories are directly or indirectly inspired by a problem dealt with in the book being promoted through that competition. The administrator determines the task: the genre it should take, a topic of a potential story, the question which is most essential in it, and/or the expected characters in a given narration. The number of stories submitted to particular competitions ranges between 20 and 140 and can be divided into two main categories, fiction and nonfiction. Out of 73 competitions, most require the authors to write a fictional story (45), and the other 28 are expected to recount real events or personal experiences, or share opinions and ideas of their authors. They represent various literary forms: mostly short forms of prose, but also poetry (16, 37, 66, 80, 89), letters (29, 43, 88, 89), drama (79, 84), and even blogs (117).

NONFICTION NARRATIVES

Stories in this category are concerned with the most essential problems of personal and social life. "Sociological" storytelling includes: column articles expressing one's annoyance

or fascination with the wider society (0, 34, 41), report on rubbish humans produce and how it can help characterize the ways people live (26), orations for or against some individuals who produce false evidence to do harm to others (40), whether spanking is necessary in bringing up kids or is simply an example of family violence and child abuse (34), reports on communal life and human interactions in one's neighbourhood (27), a rebellious manifesto against consumerism (40), the role of socializing (60), an essay on crime in philosophical terms (51), and how history and society shape an individual's life (56).

"Personal" stories express: struggling with fatal diseases (for example cancer) (10), overcoming such characteristics as laziness or feelings such as hatred, or preventing boredom (11), the need for and importance of friendship (77), being happy and writing a thankful "letter to life" for this happiness (88), being honest with oneself and expressing it in a letter addressed to oneself (89).

Another type is made up of all kind of recollections: memorable journeys, places or events (18, 21, 63, 110), stories of childhood friendships (22), solving mysterious riddles or detective investigations together (28,36), an unusual Christmas Eve when there was no empty plate left since a stranger did arrive on that special day (29), stories of beloved pets and human-animal friendship (40), how to take one's time and avoid wasting it (66), a diary page on advantages and disadvantages of being a teenager (71), and describing the place where you feel safe and relaxed (140).

The scope of both fiction and non-fiction stories reflects the most important social values, such as vitality of human interactions, protection of the natural environment, the family, community life and socializing, and the awareness that we do not live in a vacuum and are subject to social and historical processes. The phenomena and attitudes which are criticized include dishonesty, excessive conformity, and consumerism. The conclusion is: we should be critical of the society we happen to live in and change the aspects of it which require transformation. Also personal stories reveal what values are present in fictive worlds of the books and what really matters in the real social life of individuals. And it is love, friendship, animals, and some traditional customs which are particularly appreciated.

FICTION NARRATIVES

In fiction stories, the literary kinds are diversified and more directly connected with the books themselves. Thus the authors are asked to "sing", for example, troubadour poems of victory to commemorate the deeds of a ruler (16), a lullaby which a chemical scientist could have sung to her/his children (37), a poem which trees perhaps sing (66), a poem about love which emphasizes its importance (80), or poetry on traumatic experiences of war (89).

The tasks of dramatic writing seem as challenging. They are, for example, a dialogue between a man and a woman in love who tell each other about their feelings while dancing together (79) or a dialogue between a narrator and a giant whom he/she happens to meet in the wilderness, in a blizzard (84). In one of the competitions they are even asked to write apocrypha on a day in the life of Jesus as a child (41), tales (58) and legends as those linked to the city built by competitors in virtual reality which they are then to name and write its founding legend (66). Storytelling connected with magic and fantasy are also those written in

competition 106 which tells us what there is on the other side, behind the door to the world of dreams; 47, in which they are asked to create a fantasy story that ends with death of its main character, or 44, which requires the authors prove that magic is everywhere around us.

Participants are also expected write utopias, such as the story of the world under a glass bell which separates its inhabitants from the real world somewhere else (104), an image of a world dominated and controlled by females (34, 48), and science fiction dystopia presenting our planet after atomic disaster and the main hero as one of the surviving few (104).

However, most of the storytelling takes the form of short prose forms that focus on either ordinary or unusual events and experiences. Among them are:

- a) letters: the one a famous writer such as Alice Munro wrote to you (41);
- b) tabloid articles: an article illustrated with photos presenting a famous literary character (51);
- c) stream of consciousness short stories, such as that following Virginia Woolf's prose (54);
- d) thrillers: a detective thriller about a thief who was caught and imprisoned as any offence must be punished (58), a spy thriller traced back to World War II (72), a terrorist thriller with the main character of a nano-drug addict (80), a psychological thriller in the form of an internal monologue of a person facing an inescapable explosion in an atomic power station (84), a thriller inspired by a Stephen King book which takes place in a fan park (124); a blog as eulogy of the internet, which remains the only medium of communication after some disaster which affected inhabitants of our planet – a biological weapons thriller (117);
- e) other imagined “realistic” stories on lives of heroes from the books: a weapons dealer haunted by bad luck (41), or a person renting a room with total strangers (51), an account of symbolic meanings of flowers, through which people communicate (56), a story behind the name of the house you live in (64), enchanting landscape descriptions (79), a day in life of an addict (91).

Another creative technique applied in the contest is role taking in which participants are expected to become troubadours (16) or traditional gondoliers in Venice who tell about their daily experiences (33), detectives who investigate crime cases in modern times, in ancient Greece, or try to solve the mystery of a murder committed on a very nice, sunny day (28, 40, 69), hired hands who show their skills in the art of mediation and diplomacy (29), lawyers defending a fraud in court (35), a hippie who shows life in New York (41), and an elfin: a character in fantasy prose and the so-called paranormal romances (100).

And finally there are three competitions with the book as the main “hero” in both the printed novels and the stories inspired by them. Firstly, there is a nonfiction book by Helena Wayne who published letters written by a renowned Polish anthropologist and his wife (*The Story of a Marriage. The Letters of Bronisław Malinowski and Elsie Masson*, 2012). The participants are expected to write an imaginary letter of the anthropologist who has just discovered a primitive tribe of Librophiles, inhabitants of the Literary Islands. They are to focus on their courtship and mating rituals (43).

Another book promoted this way is a thriller by Peter Robb, *Midnight in Sicily* (2013), in which he presents this island as an exotic, lush, warm, historic and beautiful place, but also

overwhelmed by the inescapable presence of the mafia. The competitors are then asked to write a story of the tourist who buys a book which appears to be a precious artefact searched for by the mafia (54).

And the third competition whose object is a book about smuggling drugs (Luca Castello's *A Super Smuggler*, 2013) became the inspiration for almost 80 participants who were expected to write a story about an ominous world in which it is not drugs but books that are strictly forbidden. Their task was to write a fiction story presenting the very act of smuggling into Poland half a million copies of Adam Mickiewicz's epics. Five of the winners received copies of Castello's novel (67) provided by the publisher which sponsored this competition (Fig. 3):



Figure 3. Token of the winner in the competition

One of the awards went to “Livrer” who had already read 2,438 books, so he ranks very high in the hierarchy of status accepted by the website's community, as the number of books one declares having read is the main criterion taken into account in this ranking. Here is his story, whose main heroes are the two very experienced smugglers Mitch (Mieciu) and Steve (Stef):

– “What is it this time?” – Mitch hissed through teeth clenched on a fag-end, then spit it on the ground.

– “The container of ‘Pan Tadeusz’” – stammered Steve slowly, for whom the art of reading has been a difficult problem since his early years in elementary school.

– “I do not care whose shit it is. I want to know what's inside” – hissed Mitch kicking the wooden box. “Let's open it”.

Steve's mental system was suspended until Mitch punched on his head and got it started. Then he gave up solving the mystery of the line of small black signs.

– “A what?” – he gibbered.

– “Tell you what. Open it, I am not going to carry a pig in a poke and make faces to those at the customs” – he answered, prying the lid open. “Oh, the son of a b...itch” – his mouth fell open when he saw the thick volumes.

– “What's this?” – Steve was flicking through one of the books.

– “Books – the best stuff. Fuck, thirteen-syllable piece – do you know what rush you feel after taking it?” [...]

(5 hours later at the border)

– Documents and the car for customs control – the jaded customs officer left his warm room reluctantly. “Have you got anything to declare, some illegal cargo?” – He continued directing his torch up and down the trailer.

– “Well, nothing special.”

– “And this box? Open it” – the guard insisted as if he noticed something suspicious in the behaviour of the driver. The opened box revealed the contents of the container – neat rows of several hundreds of marijuana joints made the top layer.

– “Well, not bad party is coming, isn’t it?”

– “You know, it’s my brother’s wedding, and baptism of the child soon afterward. You know”.

The officer daydreamed for a while, then patted the box – “Smoke to me guys and take care”.

(5 minutes later)

– “Uffff” snuffled Mitch – things were hot. Fortunately he did not dig deeper. “We are rich Steve! Can you hear me – rich!” (*Jak transportować tony książek*).

SUMMARY

The competitions presented above prove that the internet is a culturally and socially meaningful means of literary communication. It can be commercially useful (in promotion of literary markets) and it can constitute a friendly cultural environment for participation in literary culture as well as a place where the creative abilities of reader-authors can be presented for their peers to read and evaluate. Thus, through providing interactive opportunities the web becomes a factor in creative social networks and communities. And the task of the researcher is to observe how these connections give rise to cultural artefacts of both a “virtual” and a “real” nature. The artefact we focused on in this article was digital storytelling. Most stories presented on the website under study are text-based, and visual or audio elements are rare in them, although they are employed more broadly in other discussion groups. It may have resulted from the source of inspiration, printed literature, and the role of moderators who announced particular competitions and designed a general scope of content and form of the expected stories.

To sum up, it should be emphasized that the storytelling in this discussion group plays an important role which goes far beyond its manifest function of winning a book. The most crucial of its latent functions seems participation in literary culture and practising creative writing. Another one is its cognitive function: obtaining both general knowledge necessary to write stories (historical, geographical, social) and rather specialized knowledge of particular literary genres and kinds. And last but not least, its promotional function, not only in purely commercial terms but non-material as well: encouragement to read literary fiction for its own sake. Such a friendly coexistence of the internet and the printed book illustrates the phenomenon of media convergence and interdependence between analogue and digital means of social communication.

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CYFROWE OPOWIEŚCI: TWÓRCZE PISANIE JAKO FORMA UCZESTNICTWA W KULTURZE LITERACKIEJ

Cyfrowe opowieści pisane na portalu Lubimyczytac.pl przyczyniają się do wzrostu liczby czytelników, do aktywnego uczestnictwa w dyskursie literackim, i do zmiany biernych konsumentów kultury popularnej w aktywnych aktorów pola literatury. Przy zastosowaniu antropologicznego podejścia i metody wirtualnej etnografii zbadano jeden podsegment tego portalu, aby dowiedzieć się, jak jedno medium komunikacji przyczynia się do rozwoju kreatywnego pisania i do samego czytelnictwa oraz jego promocji.

Słowa kluczowe: media, cyfrowe opowieści, twórcze pisanie, konkurs, nagroda, promocja