

Multimodal Discourse Strategies of Factuality and Subjectivity in Educational Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

As new technologies continue to emerge, students and lecturers are provided with new educational tools. One such tool, which is increasingly used in higher education, is digital storytelling, i.e. multi-media digital narratives. Despite the increasing attention that education and media scholars have paid to digital storytelling, there is scant research examining digital narratives from a discourse-analytic perspective.

This paper addresses this gap in the literature and, in line with the belief that individuals make meaning through a range of semiotic devices, including, among others, language, sound, graphics and text, it aims to examine discourse strategies of factuality and subjectivity in historical-cultural digital narratives and their multimodal realisations. To carry out this study a corpus of 16 digital stories was compiled and analysed from a multidisciplinary framework which draws from studies on digital storytelling, computer-mediated communication, media studies, and multimodal discourse analysis. Results show that students/digital story tellers resort to a number of varied multimodal discursive strategies which are constitutive of their identity as capable students in an educational setting.

Keywords

Digital storytelling; Education; Multimodal discourse; Factuality; Subjectivity.

Estrategias discursivas multimodales, factuales y subjetivas en el relato digital educativo

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Resumen

Las nuevas tecnologías ofrecen a estudiantes y profesores nuevas herramientas educativas. Entre éstas destaca el relato digital, una herramienta que se emplea cada vez más en educación superior. Pese a la gran atención que el relato digital ha recibido por parte de expertos en educación y en medios, existen escasos estudios de relatos digitales desde la perspectiva del análisis del discurso.

Este trabajo se hace eco de esta escasez y, partiendo de la premisa de que los individuos construimos el significado a través de variados medios semióticos que incluyen, entre otros, lenguaje, sonido, gráficos y textos, examina las estrategias discursivas, factuales y subjetivas, en narrativas histórico-culturales y su realización multimodal. Para desarrollar este estudio se recogió un corpus de 16 relatos digitales que se analizó desde un enfoque multidisciplinar que se apoya en estudios previos de relato digital, de comunicación por ordenador, estudios de medios de comunicación y análisis del discurso multimodal. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes/narradores digitales recurren a una gran variedad de estrategias discursivas multimodales que contribuyen a formar su identidad de estudiantes capaces en el entorno educativo.

Palabras clave

Digital storytelling; Education; Multimodal discourse; Factuality; Subjectivity.

I. Introducción

As new technologies continue to emerge, students and lecturers are provided with new educational tools. One such tool, which is increasingly used in higher education, is digital storytelling, i.e. multi-media digital narratives.

Digital narratives constitute a hybrid social practice/action that shares features with traditional forms of oral/written storytelling, television documentaries, video games and research reports (Hartley and McWilliam 2009; Swales, 1990) and therefore combine the expression of emotion which is characteristic of the confessional disclosure of storytelling with the 'authenticity of the documentary' (Hartley and McWilliam 2009, p.5).

The social practice of digital storytelling originated in the CDS at California, directed by Joe Lambert, and was soon taken up by other institutions throughout the world that lent it support (e.g. BBC Cymru-Wales "Capture Wales" project and the work of Daniel Meadows) and turned it into an international practice used for various purposes. Recent research by media scholars places digital storytelling as a social movement within current debates on user-generated digital content, consumer creativity and productivity, and media participation (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009). Thus, the increase in participation of ordinary people in the media is taken (sometimes, overoptimistically cf. Chouliaraki, 2010) to foster the democratization of cultural production and social change (Bou-Franch in press; Turner, 2010). However, despite the attention that digital storytelling is attracting, there is scant research examining digital narratives from a discourse-analytic perspective (but see Rodríguez Ruiz, 2007).

In order to contribute to fill this gap, this paper reports on an ongoing project that seeks to unveil the discourse strategies and resources employed in a corpus of digital narratives. Specifically, it focuses on the expression of factuality and subjectivity in historical-cultural narratives produced within a classroom context in the University of Valencia. The object of interest is, then, educational stories that report on historical / cultural events or features.

An important premise underlying this study is that individuals make meaning not only through language but through a variety of semiotic resources including language, sound, graphics and text (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). Therefore, the study adopts a multimodal approach.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to examine strategies of factuality and subjectivity in historical / cultural digital narratives and their multimodal realisations.

II. Method

To carry out this study, a corpus of 16 historical / cultural digital narratives was compiled and analysed. The stories were approximately 6 minutes long and were produced by Spanish undergraduates of English Studies for the module 'History and Culture of the English-speaking countries', during the 2011 spring term.

Digital stories can be of different types, ranging from personal narratives or instructional stories to narratives that recount historical events (Gregori-Signes, 2008a/b; McLellan, 2006; Robin, 2006). Although there are many possibilities, uses and contexts for storytelling – and, therefore, it is difficult to provide one single, umbrella definition for all, –it seems evident that digital narratives are adapted to "fit the goals and ideologies of each of these contexts– from public service broadcasting to community activism and education." (Burgess and Klæbe, 2009, p.155). The corpus of history and culture narratives in this study is no exception and, therefore, the stories are shaped by the academic context in which they were produced. Undoubtedly, the stories in turn shape and transform this context, which is open to new technological tools. The data are understood as part of the classroom genre, and therefore subject to the general constraints of academic discourse (Fairclough, 2003; Swales, 1990). A major factor shaping these stories was that they were generated for a grade, i.e. to fulfil an academic assignment. Once produced, students uploaded their stories to the class blog, thus complying with the current demotic movement which empowers ordinary people by granting them greater visibility. It must also be noted that a major challenge for story-tellers/students was that they were both learners of English as a second language and learners of History and Culture of the English-speaking countries.

The assignment was conceived as having a double objective, one related to knowledge of the module, which involved a factuality dimension, and the other concerned with creativity, and related to a subjectivity dimension. In order to meet the former, students faced the need to display their knowledge of a historical period, event or people through multimedia resources. For the latter, students faced the need to be creative and make their telling personal, original and/or entertaining. This paper explores the multimodal discursive means used to meet the needs to display knowledge and to be creative, i.e. multimodal discursive strategies of factuality and subjectivity.

The framework adopted is multidisciplinary, as it draws from prior research on digital storytelling, computer-mediated communication, media studies, and multimodal discourse analysis, and takes into account the social and technological affordances of electronic communication as well as the role of variability and the construction of social identities in the Internet (Androutsopoulos, 2006; Bou-Franch, 2011; Herring, 2007). Central to this study is the view that discourse statements make different types of epistemological claims, specifically, claims regarding the state of the speaker's knowledge. In her study of television debates, Patrona (2005) adopts this view (cf. Almeida, 1992), and divides all statements into factual and non-factual. Factual statements are defined as intended "to be understood by the reader/hearer as describing an actual situation, i.e., an event or state which has already occurred or is occurring at the time the text is produced" (Patrona, 2005, p.239). Non-factual statements, in contrast, are related to speculations and predictions and are characterized as not intended to be interpreted as descriptions of actual situations or events. In this study, the latter were related to subjectivity.

The data were qualitatively analysed following a three-step procedure. First, discourse statements were classified into factual and non-factual statements (Patrona, 2005). Second, multimodal discourse strategies were identified for each type of statement. And third, the placement of each statement within the organization of the story was also considered.

III. Results

The analysis revealed that all the stories contained factual and non-factual statements that could be related to the expression of factuality and the expression of subjectivity, respectively. The analysis of factuality revealed that tellers resorted to a number of multimodal discourse strategies which included the use of direct, unmitigated statements, use of specialized jargon and providing viewers with factual detail in the form of facts and figures, and the adoption of a traditional academic structure for the narrative. The study of subjectivity showed that tellers made their stories personal and creative through multimodal discourse strategies that presented the narrative in terms of a casual conversation among friends, or in terms of a trip that takes viewers through different places and cultural symbols. Other means included use of personal pronouns (first person), the establishing of criticism and semiotic contrast through the expression of opposite meanings via different semiotic modes, the employment of multimodal, personalized connectors, use of rhetorical questions and drawing from producers' (and appealing to viewers') previous knowledge of the filmmaking industry. In the next section the results are further explored and illustrated.

IV. Discourse strategies of factuality and subjectivity

In facing the need to display their knowledge of the topic of the story, students found they had to convey information in a reliable way. As it has been shown by experts in different television shows (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Bou-Franch and Lorenzo-Dus in press; Patrona, 2005), projecting a reliable attitude towards the facts that one is dealing with, increases the validity of propositions and portrays communicators as knowledgeable speakers (cf. Patrona 2005, p.243). Traditionally, experts in broadcast talk have resorted to specific discourse strategies in order to construct their knowledge and experience in a particular field. Discourse strategies range from the formulation of impersonal views, to the presentation of facts and figures, specialized jargon and use of a formal register (cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. in press; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Locher and Hoffmann, 2006; Lorenzo-Dus, 2005; Patrona, 2005; Smith, 2010).

In the data under analysis, story tellers also resorted to such means in order to come across as reliable and knowledgeable experts, i.e. as capable students within the academic context. However, as the following examples show, they also made use of non-factual, subjective statements that made their telling original and entertaining.

In Example 1 below, storytellers use direct, unmitigated statements, which are delivered while three consecutive images zoom in and out, reinforcing the propositional, factual value of the discourse. Further, they employed music of the period being discussed, an Elvis Presley song, as background.

Example 1¹_ Those Crazy Days

Narrative voice over: "We were born in the early 50's, when **suburban life in the US urged people to settle down into a family** life after The Second World War's turmoil. The baby-boom of the 50's brought an important increase to the US population, as we, the young people of the 60's and 70's would be the ones to march, to take a stand, speak out and not support our own country in a war we had no business being in the first place"

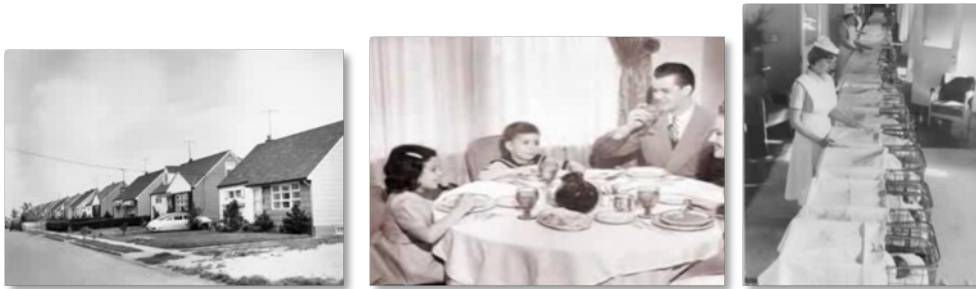


Image 1. Suburban life in the 1950s

Another discourse strategy of factuality was the use of **specialized jargon**, which enhances the expertise of the tellers. In Example 2, specialized jargon is used as the narrative fluctuates between formal and informal registers. The discourse takes the form of a **multi-party dialogue**, and appears casual. However, detailed facts - like exact dates and measures- are provided, facts which would very unlikely be provided in a 'real conversation'. Hence, this example displays both discourse strategies of factuality and subjectivity.

Furthermore, these are used in combination with another discourse strategy of subjectivity which surfaced recurrently in the data: the **taking on of new identities** that placed students/storytellers as first-hand witnesses of 20th century history and/or as experts in different aspects of the culture of the English-speaking countries. In Example 2, below, tellers took on the identity of a group of American girlfriends on tour in New York; additionally, they created avatars that were displayed over the images. Further, the **alternation of speaking turns** was visually signalled by placing a symbol - a yellow diamond - on top of the speaking avatar. Each of the five turns in example 2 was uttered in unison with the following five pictures, which display their corresponding speaking avatars.

¹ Relevant discourse strategies are given in bold. Most digital stories in the corpus can be found in the author's class blog, <http://www.historiayculturab2010.blogspot.com.es/>

Example 2 _ US Architecture






 <p>Turn 1: Hey! Do you know the Brooklyn Bridge was completed in 1883 and it is one of the oldest suspension bridges in the United States?</p>	 <p>Turn 2: Yes! And this bridge connects New York City, Manhattan and Brooklyn by spanning the East river.</p>
 <p>Turn 3: And it was the longest suspension bridge the world with a main span of 486.3 meters.</p>	 <p>Turn 4: But, the German John Augustus Roebling had previously designed and constructed shorter suspension bridges</p>
 <p>Turn 5: Their architectural style is neogothic, with characteristics pointed arches above the passageways through the stone towers.</p>	

Image 2. Alternating speaking turns in multi-party dialogue

Taking on new identities allowed storytellers to tell their story from different angles and make their telling more personal, albeit in combination with a range of facts.

The following example comes from the narrative "Those Crazy Days".

Example 3 _ Those Crazy Days

Narrative voice over: "I remember it like it was yesterday: the pacific protests, the burning of draft cards, the sit-ins, the unity among us fighting for the same cause, the peace, the love, the flowers, the music, the drugs...oh the drugs"

As can be observed in Example 3, the narrator uses the first-person, singular, pronoun, as she takes the identity of a young American in the Hippy Movement of the 1960s and 70s. As the narrative begins, to the rhythm of the Beatles' "All you need is love" and black and white pictures of the period, which display the different values of the hippy movement, the story proceeds in a personalized fashion, with the speaker expressing her feeling of belonging in this youth group through her use of **first-person, plural, pronoun**.

In the following example (4), we find another version of the discursive process of personalization.

Example 4_ US Architecture

Narrative voice over: "My grandfather told me that the opening was during the Great Depression (1929) in the US. Because of this a lot of offices weren't used. The building wasn't profitable until 1950 when Roger L. Stevens paid 51 million dollars to buy The Empire State Building ..."

In this example, the speaker resorts to use of third-person singular when she ascribes the source of certain information to a **close family relation**: it is her grandfather, the speaker recalls, who told her about The Empire State Building and the Great Depression of the 1930s. These strategies make the story more personal, close and vivid.

In another instance, factuality and subjectivity combine in different ways. Storytellers adopt a **critical perspective** through the semiotic contrast they achieve by simultaneously (1) displaying the title of their narrative in text format: "20th Century Ethnic Minorities: Fighting for Equality", (2) their opening (spoken) statement which reinforces ideas of liberty: "America is known as the land of freedom and opportunities, those ideals brought a flood of people to the United States in the 20th Century" - and (3), by using the questioning background music of the main theme of the Westside story musical, which is followed by the showing of black and white pictures of crowded ships of immigrants arriving in Ellis Island.

In example 5, storytellers further draw from another discourse strategy of factuality, i.e. the presentation of facts and figures in the form of **specialized charts**.

Example 5 _ 20th Century Ethnic Minorities: Fighting for Equality

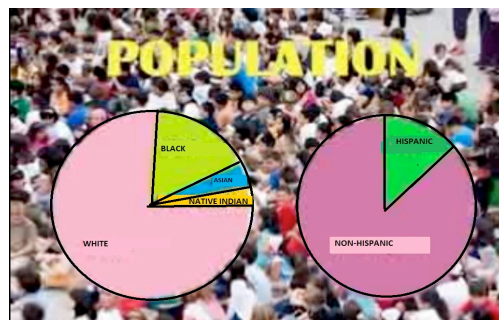


Image 3. Population pie charts

Thus, example 5 shows two pie charts of current population groups in the US, drawn from data from the US Census Bureau, pasted over a picture of a contemporary crowded street – this was a still picture shown as close up and then zooming out, for greater communicative strength of the ethnic diversity in the US today.

Other creative graphs simultaneously conveyed factuality and subjectivity.

Example 6 _ Evolution of Rock Music

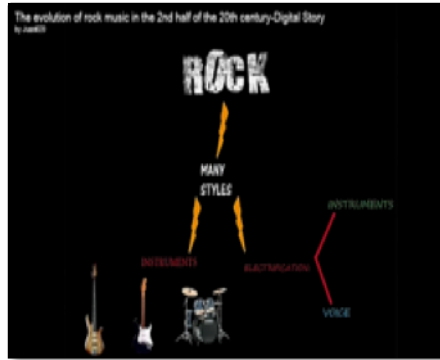


Image 4. Rock-based chart

This is the case of example 6, above, from the story titled “Evolution of Rock in the 2nd half of the 20th century”, which shows an original graph with motifs that evoke rock music, like black background, storm rays instead of arrows, and pictures of different instruments.

Other aspects of discourse organization were also involved in the communication of fact and creativity (cf. Simon-Vanderbergen 2007). In the story titled “Traditional dishes in the UK” (Example 7, below), discourse is organized in the classical, academic, five-paragraph essay with an introduction, different sections related to dishes in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, use of academic **discourse connectors** and a concluding paragraph. Storytellers took the opportunity to make use of formal, academic connectors in combination with support images depicting the flags of the different UK countries and written text with the name of each country, thus enhancing the creativity dimension of their talk in multimodal ways:

Example 7 _ Traditional Dishes in the UK

 <p data-bbox="295 1668 778 1758">“To begin with we will deal with England and its most popular dish: ‘Fish and Chips’ ...”</p>	 <p data-bbox="818 1668 1161 1697">“We’ll now turn to Wales ...”</p>
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Image 5. Visual connectors

Use of such academic discourse organization lent greater validity and credibility to their work. It must further be noted that there is another subjectivity component in these discourse markers: they are personalized through use of first person plural pronouns as in “we’ll now...” or in “Now let’s ...” . These help students meet both factual and subjective task requirements.

Another resource that allowed a creative stand was the presentation of the whole narrative as a trip.

Example 8 _ Australia

“Hello folks, you have enrolled on a trip that is going to take you to the core of Australia”



Image 6. Narrative as trip

In the story titled “Australia”, above, tellers address the audience directly, through the opening sentence of example 8, which is uttered as the bus in the picture ‘travels’ around the country leading the story.

Further, in this story students take on different social identities: one is a historian, another is a fashion designer, while others become an expert chef, and a tour guide. These identities place the students as experts, a position from which they can inform viewers of various matters with authority and expertise.

A final pattern of discourse organization evoked viewers’ **previous knowledge of the filmmaking industry** and thus marked their work as a creative piece.

Example 9 _ Two Men, One Fate

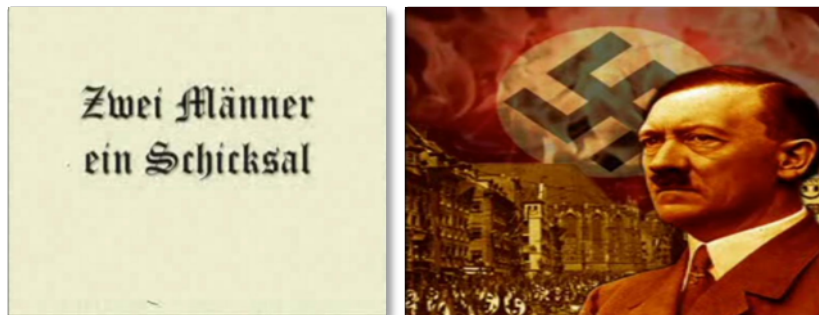


Image 7. Visual reinforcement of Nazi threat

“Can you conceive a world controlled by Nazi Germany?”

The story titled “Two men one fate”, example 9, underlines the important work of F.D. Roosevelt and W. Churchill during the Second World War. The narrative begins with an embedded short image of the famous, roaring MGM lion. After this typical beginning at the start of movies, tellers next make their main point through several discursive means. Firstly, they translate the story title into German (German text on screen), which is then read in both German and English. , ,Secondly, tellers formulate a rhetorical question (“can you conceive a world controlled by Nazi Germany?”) and reinforce the idea of the Nazi threat posed in the question by showing a picture of Hitler. Through these means, tellers come across as persuasive and creative. Their point was that the world today is not controlled by Nazi Germany due to the efforts of two great men, Roosevelt and Churchill.

In a similar way, the story titled “Mad Men’s America”, which focuses on the history and role of advertising agencies in the 1960s US, has a **double ending**. One is creative and related to the movie industry, while the other is factual and related to the academic world. The former is achieved through the display of the text “Starring” followed by the names of all group members in a list format; this invokes the style in which filmmakers announce the credits at the end of a film. The latter includes all the references used in the production of the video clip and it is an obligatory final section of all academic work.

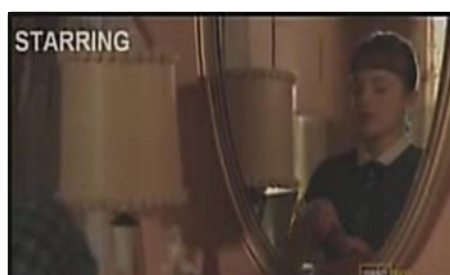


Image 8. Typical movie ending

V. Conclusion

The study of a corpus of students’ digital narratives for their History and Culture class revealed students’ ability to cope with new contents in their second language /culture. The analysis showed that stories fluctuated from the discourse of factuality to the discourse of subjectivity (cf. Patrona, 2005). It was argued that factuality allowed students to display their knowledge while subjectivity was employed to include the required dimensions of creativity and entertainment.

The analysis of multimodal discourse strategies in the data suggests their interdependence and the ways in which they reinforce each other. Importantly, students needed to attend to the need for factuality and the need for subjectivity to meet the educational requirements of the task. It is possible to argue, in this context, that their attitude towards, and presentation of, facts and of the whole story is constitutive of their identity as capable students in an academic setting. Stories have been argued to promote learning and personal involvement (Gregori 2008a/b; Lowenthal, 2009; McLelland, 2006). This paper has unveiled the ways in which this is achieved in the data.

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