Digital story-telling as a form of faith formation
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In the last five years there has been an explosion of interest in, and research
connected to, understanding faith identity in contemporary contexts. The National Study
of Youth and Religion (NSYR) offers us rich data to explore in relation to young people
(Smith; Christerson, et. al.). Putnam and Campbell's book *American Grace* offers a
multi-faceted and dispassionate look at religion in the today's United States. In more
specifically pastoral contexts, Martinson, Black and Roberto's study of exemplary youth
ministry provides insight into the discrete elements that point towards ongoing youth
involvement in Christian congregations, and the Interfaith Youth Core's publications
explore how shared service aligned with opportunities for exploration of faith stories can
lead to enhanced religious identity (http://www.ifyc.org/). Yet even while there is much
that is encouraging about the Martinson/Black/Roberto study, in general the basic thread
of observation tends toward a recognition that religious faith is on the ebb in the US, with
more people identifying themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" or even as having a
religious identity of "none."

At the same time the birth of the web – and even more recently, of web 2.0 and
social media tools – has dramatically altered the larger discursive terrain, creating a
multitude of media spaces in which people participate in beginning, sustaining,
intensifying, and complicating human relationships (Jenkins, 2009, 2006; Shirky). It is
clearly too early to draw any definitive conclusions about the ways in which digital tools
are altering such relationships, but there are at least three dynamics that appear to be in

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flux in the midst of participatory media contexts: how we understand authority, what we mean by and experience as authenticity, and the many ways in which we can exercise agency (Hess, 2010, 2008).

When these three elements – *authority, authenticity* and *agency* – are considered in the context of religious identity and religious education, it is not surprising that faith formation has become a deeply challenging and often conflicted process. For communities of faith with clear hierarchical structures such as the Roman Catholic church, the flattening of *authority* that has come with digital tools creates numerous crises (eg. the response to child sexual abuse [Shirky]). At the opposite end of the spectrum, amongst evangelical Protestant Christian communities, the vast reach and speed of digital tools creates a similar crisis of *authority* (eg. the recent controversy over Rob Bell's latest book [Eckholm]).

What constitutes *authentic* faith? This question also reverberates throughout digitally mediated spaces. Perhaps most striking is the reality that faith is no longer sustained and clarified primarily, or even generally, within religious institutions. The sociological research suggests that the group which is growing most rapidly in the US, in terms of religious identity, is "none" (Kosmin, et. al.). The number of people who identify themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" is at an all time high. Indeed, the question of "what constitutes *authentic* faith" is increasingly being answered in popular culture contexts. A recent episode of the hit TV series *Glee* is a good example. In the episode entitled "Grilled Cheesus" the students of McKinley High School explore what prayer means almost entirely absent institutional religious interpreters (Falchuk). Indeed, Clark notes that figures such as Stephen Colbert "who are positioned to serve as

interpreters of religion's role in society, and whose views articulate those that are consensually accepted, thus emerge as authoritative figures in contemporary culture" (4).

These examples are drawn from the Christian context, where – at least in the US – there are still many vestiges of "established religion" to support faith formation. For other communities of faith, however, religious education has to be composed in spite of the larger cultural surround, or even in active contestation with it. Imagine trying to raise healthy Muslim children in the midst of the current Islamophobia in the US; or trying to help your family celebrate Holi while contesting the representations of Hinduism in the *Simpsons*. Active engagement in practices of faith is the single most effective means of faith formation scholars have identified (Bass), but how does one practice faith without a larger active public within which to do so?

These dynamic streams of *authority* and *authenticity* flow together into perhaps the single biggest challenge to faith formation in the US context: how we understand *agency*, or the active initiating, executing and controlling of one's actions in the world. Nearly every religious community has a theology or theory for how agency occurs. In Christianity, for instance, God is understood as the primary Agent, with varying degrees of control (depending upon the theological perspective on free will, predestination, and so on) over God's creation and God's creatures. There are even more complex articulations of the relationship between human agency and transcendence in Hinduism (Clooney) and Buddhism (Makransky).

In contrast to these religious frameworks, "agency" is generally understood in popular US contexts as individually driven and individually consequent, with less and less ability to imagine organized collective action or action that is primarily group

oriented (an exception to this statement might exist within some ethnic communities, communities of color, and other groups that have traditionally been marginalized). Although the advent of participatory digital media has begun to challenge this ideological dominance of the individual, that resistance is by no means widespread or hegemonic (Benkler).

Thus faith formation in the US context, regardless of the community of faith, contends with a culture of individualism, a popular cultural landscape of religious stereotypes, and the breakdown of the traditional institutions of religious community. How can faith formation proceed in the midst of such challenges?

For the rest of this paper I will try to provide tentative responses to such questions in the following way. First, I will offer a brief definition of faith formation using both "religious education" and "spirituality" as elements of the discussion. Second, I will define digital storytelling as I use that term in this paper. Third, I will take these definitions and note the convergence and synergy that emerge when engaging digital storytelling as a form of faith formation. Finally, I will share what we are learning in research on digital storytelling as a form of faith formation.

*Definition of faith formation*

Given the vast array of definitions that have accrued to the term "faith formation," I will note here that my use of this term incorporates two elements: religious education and spirituality. I contend that "faith formation" is a process of religious education that takes very seriously the dynamic presence of spirituality as part of the process. By

"religious education" I mean something very similar to Mary Boys' definition of the term: "Religious education is the making accessible of the traditions of the religious community and the making manifest of the intrinsic connection between traditions and transformation" (193). Notice that this definition is not linked to a specific religious tradition, it could be used within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. Notice, too, that it emphasizes "traditioning" as opposed to "traditionalism" (Pelikan, 65).

As a definition of "spirituality," I would point to Sandra Schneiders' work, which although it is rooted in Christian tradition, can be read more widely than that:

> ... spirituality is understood as the unique and personal response of individuals to all that calls them to integrity and transcendence.... [it] has something to do with the integration of all aspects of human life and experience. … spirituality is that attitude, that frame of mind which breaks the human person out of the isolating self. As it does that, it directs him or her to another relationship in whom one's growth takes root and sustenance (264).

These two definitions, when linked together, define what I mean by "faith formation" in this paper. The former element describes the communal or collective character of faith formation, while the latter voices the more personal elements of that process. Faith formation, then, must take into account the historical and contemporary process of engagement with a community of faith more collectively, at the same time as it attends to the journey of individual persons as they seek to listen for and develop a relationship with transcendence. In Christian terms, to "know as we are known" (Palmer).

*Digital storytelling*

In this paper I am working primarily within the tradition of digital storytelling that has been established by the work of Lambert, Weinshenker, and others associated with

the Center for Digital Storytelling (http://www.storycenter.org/). That process of telling stories using digital tools emerged from a community theater group. Since 1993, the CDS has taught the elements of this process in myriad contexts, estimating that more than 12,000 stories have been created (Weinshenker, 1). In contrast to some of what is labelled "digital storytelling," the CDS process is focused primarily on the storytelling part of that phrase. The digital tools might at first glance seem incidental or even merely instrumental to the primary learning. As Joe Lambert notes:

> What we know is that when you gather people in a room, and listen, deeply listen to what they are saying, and by example encourage others to listen, magic happens. The magic is simple. We do not have many safe places to be heard. (95)

There are, however, elements of the dynamics peculiar to digital tools and digital distribution that add a layer of learning outcomes that were originally unanticipated by the CDS, and at the same time lend themselves to powerful use when engaged in faith formation (Lambert, 10-11).

To explore that layer I need to turn to the work three scholars: Michael Wesch, and the collaboration of John Seely Brown with Douglas Thomas. Wesch is a cultural anthropologist at Kansas State University who works in the field of digital ethnography. He and his students are rapidly becoming famous for their short videos exploring various aspects of digital culture. "The Machine is Using Us," for instance, has been viewed more than 11,360,000 times. Perhaps even more surprising, given its length and scholarly subject, Wesch's 55 minute lecture, "An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube" has been viewed more than 1,660,000 times.[1] Wesch has observed that the medium of YouTube "vlogs" – a form of autobiographical self-presentation to the imagined

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[1] Both of these can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/user/mwesch

community of YouTube – demonstrate an important experiential paradox. Their combination of "anonymity plus physical distance plus rare and ephemeral dialogue can equal hatred as public performance," and at the same time, "anonymity plus physical distance plus rare and ephemeral dialogue can equal the freedom to experience humanity without fear or anxiety (29:13)."[2]

I believe there has been enough media coverage of the "hatred as public performance" element for readers to have some sense of that dimension of the YouTube experience, but much less attention has been paid to what it means to have the freedom to "experience humanity without fear or anxiety." Yet that kind of experience, built upon the constructed or perceived intimacy of being able to stare directly at a close-up of a person baring their experience to a potentially global audience, is perhaps most analogous to the kind of spiritual confessionalism previously offered through spiritual autobiographies (Bondi).

The CDS authors have pointed to the power of the connection between the viewer of a digital story and that story. They have also noted that the creator of the digital story in many instances is "writing to the future" in a way that articulates an aspiration which, once having been articulated, draws the creator towards achieving it (Weinshenker). While the spiritual autobiographies of times past most often were explicit in their address to God, or at least explicit about their author's desire to explore a relationship with God, what is most analogous here is not the engagement with a Divine entity, but rather the

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[2] These quotations are taken from my personal transcription of the "An anthropological introduction to YouTube" video available here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-lZ4_hU [cited on May 11, 2011] In all cases the numbers in parentheses refer to time elapsed.

baring of one's affective knowledge of self in relation, and the at times aspirational quality of the reflection.

A further element Wesch observes comes in what he terms a "cultural inversion," where we are "craving connection but experience it as constraint" (31:34). He notes three elements in particular — individualism, independence and commercialization — that we are immersed in, but which *vlogs* seem to want to counter by reaching out for, or at least expressing a desire for, community, relationships and authenticity. This "cultural inversion" directly invokes the elements I stated earlier as essential for faith formation, both in terms of community as well as in personal spiritual connection. Wesch notes that "Media do not just distance us, they connect us in new ways that can sometimes feel distant but sometimes that distance allows us to connect more deeply than ever before ( 31:34)… And new forms of community create new forms of self-understanding (32:10)."

These elements that Wesch is pointing to appear to be echoed in Brown and Thomas' observations in their recent book *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating Imagination for a World of Constant Change.* In this book, much of which is an integrating argument based on the research coming out of the MacArthur Foundation Digital Media and Learning Project (http://tinyurl.com/2d74eb9), Brown and Thomas argue that learning which emerges in media culture (particularly as observed in gaming and social media) is best understood as a process of "indwelling," with three key questions – what is my relationship to others? what am I able to explore? and how can I utilize the available resources?– constituting distinctive characteristics of learning today (101-105). Note that the dynamic tensegrity of the communal/personal is described in this

term of "indwelling." Note, too, that it is possible to see iterations of "authority, authenticity and agency" being voiced.

What do I conclude from this work in the broader field of learning and new media? That there is at least the possibility, if we can figure out how to approach it, of engaging in digital media production in ways that open up elements of faith formation constructively and with particular resonance to our contemporary environments. It must be remembered, however, that Wesch's research also names the problematic challenges of this environment, with the opportunity for "public performance of hatred."[3] People working in the field of faith formation need to enter into these processes with care and attention to the dynamics of authority, authenticity and agency. We need to discern ways to apprentice people into experiencing the freedom to observe humanity without stress or anxiety and that move them into the embrace of empathy (Hess, forthcoming). At the same time we need to find ways to help our learners weave their own stories into the larger story of the faith community through time, and at least in traditions where this matters, with God (or transcendence or the Divine) (Anderson and Foley, Scharer and Hilberath).

*Digital storytelling as a form of faith formation*

One very fruitful learning mechanism for doing so lies in the pedagogical design of digital storytelling, using story prompts that evoke connections to communities of faith.

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[3] It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this element of Wesch's observation, but I would point in particular to Lisa Nakamura's book *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* for a cogent discussion of how "objects" are created within visual culture – including a process whereby human beings and relationships become "other" through systems of race and other oppressions.

Because digital storytelling begins in learning to tell stories, and most frequently stories

that have a personal foundation to them, the process is immediately congruent with the

kind of faith formation process that seeks to sustain and develop spirituality. Further, in

learning how to construct a story – learning the basic elements of a story, working in a

story circle to refine and hone a story, multiple rounds of editing as various elements are

placed into a digital framework – learners are brought into a more critically engaged

relationship with their own story, as well as, potentially, the story of their community of

faith. When the additional layer of distributing the story in digital format is added, the

process can take on a deeply communal character (McQuistion). That communal

character takes shape around the individual learner's agency. As Ola Erstad and Kenneth

Silseth write:

> Digital storytelling, then, both gives students the opportunity to learn how to use
> technology to make their own voice heard and the opportunity to use knowledge
> and experience acquired outside of school in the process of becoming citizens – a
> potential way to foster agency…. The democratic potential of digital storytelling
> lies both in the way people might learn to express themselves and the way it
> challenges traditional conceptions of formal vs. informal ways of learning (2008,
> 218).

Erstad and Silseth are speaking about school contexts, but there are additional elements to

consider within communities of faith. As I noted at the beginning of this essay the advent

of digital tools has tended to flatten and decentralize authority. In a community of faith

such as the Roman Catholic Church, there is a delicate balance that needs to be tended

between empowering individual learners and at the same time generating recognition of,

and eventual investment in, communal authority (structured in vertical ways through the

teaching magisterium of the church, and in horizontal ways through what is traditionally

known as the *sensus fidelium*). While churches in less hierarchical structures will not

have such obvious institutional tensions, they still must deal with how authority is developed and vested institutionally. There are similar challenges in other communities of faith beside Christianity (Hoover; Mitchell and Marriage).

So far there are only a few projects investigating digital storytelling in the context of religious education, but their findings are encouraging. Kaare and Lundby, for instance, in Norway, have been involved in studying one of the Norwegian church's pilot projects in new forms of faith formation. Their work on a project that engaged digital storytelling suggests that:

> By participating in the Story Circle, and negotiating how their stories should be constructed and interpreted, the young narrators are connected to the collective identity of the congregation. Identity in practice is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and of social categories, but also because it is produced as a lived experience of participation in specific communities (2008, 117).

Similarly, in a doctor of ministry project completed within the program at United Theology Seminary in Dayton, OH, where McQuistion used digital storytelling as the culminating project of a year-long confirmation program, there was consistent evidence that the young people involved in the program had very positive experiences in deepening their faith — a process which spilled over into the larger church community (146).

In a project based in the Denver, CO area, Clark and Dierberg worked with both Christian and Jewish youth ministry groups. The youth involved in these projects speak openly of learning spaces that provide room for exploration and openness of identity construction (Clark and Dierberg). But they are also spaces that are clearly communal, collective, engaged in religious community, and present to the reality of transcendence. These are not utopian places –the dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, and so on

are still present – but they offer us some room to begin to retrieve, reclaim, and re-authorize those elements of religious community that are transformative. The Denver research project began as a way to help young people gain some skills in media production. As the project continues I am particularly interested in discovering what, if any, connections there are between the young people learning to tell and share their stories, and a deepening investment in a community of faith.

In my own teaching I have worked with digital storytelling in class projects in which I assigned a particular context from which I required students to draw on in telling a digital story. I have been surprised – but encouraged – to discover that even when there was initial resistance to being "told" what story pool they needed to draw upon, my students found myriad stories to tell, drew on multiple genres within which to tell them, and clearly expressed themselves in ways that were recognizably their own. In one class, for instance, I required students to tell a story that connected in some way with the Minnesota Without Poverty coalition.[4] Here are just four examples from that class:

> (1) an interview with a person who was formerly homeless
> (http://vimeo.com/23531694)
> (2) a public service introduction to a nonprofit working on food issues
> (http://vimeo.com/23508587)
> (3) a hard/metal rock dizzying exploration of food abundance and scarcity
> (http://vimeo.com/23217084)
> (4) a satirical, animated look at the arguments against ending poverty
> (http://www.xtranormal.com/watch/11488723/mn-without-poverty)

In (1) the two students creating the video have been advocates in nonprofit settings, and are deeply relational learners. Their interview was set to a song by Tracy Chapman, and

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[4] The Coalition is a statewide group of diverse religious organizations that have come together to work on advocacy against poverty [http://mnwithoutpoverty.org/].

they drew out of their interviewee a wonderfully organic theological reflection. In (2) the student is a talented singer, and recently retired English teacher. She created a piece that told the story of a local nonprofit organization accompanied by a soundtrack of herself singing, all the while evoking a biblical frame for the issue. In (3) the student meditated on whether it is even possible to end poverty. She used magnetic letters and original photographs of her own kitchen, along with a dizzyingly recorded trip to a huge grocery store set to a driving hard rock soundtrack, to evoke dis-ease with the clash between abundance and hunger that is evident even in middle class communities. And in (4) one of my students crafted an *Xtranormal* animation that engaged the contradictions between biblical mandates to feed the poor and free market apologia in a comically satirical way.

In each of these cases – the Norwegian project, the Wisconsin project, the Denver youth groups project, and my class assignments – the primary challenge was in developing the story, *not* in the use of the technology to craft the story. Yet the lure of learning to use the technology added an element of energy and engagement to the projects, I believe at least in part because it drew on the "cultural inversions" Wesch describes, and promoted the "indwelling" of which Brown and Thomas write.

The most pressing challenge for faith formation in these stories is finding constructive ways to, as Kaare and Lundby put it, develop identity that is "is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and of social categories, but also because it is produced as a lived experience of participation in specific communities (2008, 117). Towards that end researchers are exploring story prompts that invite intergenerational stories, that connect with biblical narratives, that

evoke specific practices of faith, and/or that deepen and extend themes that emerge from popular culture but which are also found within faith narratives.

Ohler makes a similar point about stories in general, when he writes that one way to create resonance across a community is to ask questions such as "how are you different having developed this project? What do you realize now about your life or about life in general that you didn't before? How does what you have learned relate to others in similar situations?" (104). In the faith formation projects, a question like "What does it mean for you to pray?" is a story prompt that can be used to elicit stories across generations, as well as connected to biblical themes. "I first knew there was a God when…" is another prompt that often elicits interesting stories. Prompts such as "I knew that church was _____ when I first experienced _____" can lead to stories that are of experiences of estrangement and alienation from religious institution. Yet telling such stories is a first step to re-entering religious community, and so is a powerful moment of faith formation, too. The prompts were important, but the organic process of working stories in the midst of story circles, and later distributing them via *vimeo*, *feautor,* and other such websites developed a communal, collective dynamic.

Another challenge of working with digital stories in faith formation comes from the care with which we need to enter into this work with young people. Children as young as eight and ten years old are comfortable working with digital media, but may not be at all familiar with the language of faith. Drawing them out and helping them to craft stories of their own experiences needs to be done in environments of safety and respect, and with guides who are well versed in religious education with children. The resulting

stories need to be shared first within family settings prior to sharing them more widely; and then, only with parental permission.

Even doing this work with teens and young adults requires care, as young people may be fluent in the tools but less familiar with the dynamics involved in sharing such stories with, and in opening themselves up to, a wider public. This challenge is a good one, however, since the task of developing appropriate social practices that engage new media is one that young people need to engage whatever the context they are inhabiting. Indeed it is one of the forms of "apprenticeship" on the road to avoiding and/or mitigating the public performance of hatred, for which this form of faith formation is particularly well suited.

The work that has been done in non-digital settings focused on storytelling and cultural studies in religious education is also helpful in this element of the learning design. See, for example, Conde-Frazier (2007), Court (2007), Foster (2007), Irizarry (2003, 2008), Miedema and Roebben (2008), Parker (2006, 2003), and Selçuk (2008). Stories are at the heart of faith experience, they often form the primary content of faith practices that engage sacred texts, and they wind their way through liturgical and other ritual practices. Indeed, much of the literature in the field of Christian religious education in the last decade has centered around discussion of narrative in religious identity. See, for instance, the work of Avest, Bakker & Miedema (2008), Dalton (2003), Everist (2000), Vail (2007), Gilmour (1997), Groome (1991), Kang (2009), Mercer (2008), Parker (2003), Smith (2004), and Wimberly (1994).

*Some tentative conclusions*

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, the pace of change in our current contexts, particularly around emerging digital tools, is far too rapid to draw definitive conclusions about the impact and utility of such tools when used within faith formation. Yet our experience to date is that there is a powerful and deeply constructive learning convergence at the intersection of digital storytelling and faith formation. Dynamics of learning observed in other settings —Brown and Thomas' observations about "indwelling" as the heart of a new culture of learning, for instance — suggest that digital tools are dramatically reshaping our learning contexts. Those of us concerned with faith formation ignore these shifts not only at our own peril, but at the peril of our communities of faith.

It is too late to think that we can simply do "what we have always done" in faith formation. Such methods no longer function well in our pluralistic, non-established religion contexts. Yet all around us there are examples of experiential learning unfolding through the use of emerging digital tools (Watkins). Why not draw on these experiments within religious learning? Digital storytelling may well be the best bridge we have to a future of vibrant faith communities. If we are able to help people come to a richer sense of themselves as people of faith, and at the same time give them access to creative production tools that increase their sense of personal and communal agency, why would we do anything less?

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