

Early College Folio

Digital by Necessity
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“Digital by Necessity”: An Interview with Dr. Jane Wanninger

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In the summer of 2020, Dr. Jane Wanninger participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Institute hosted by Agnes Scott College to learn about implementing digital storytelling in the classroom, which ironically had to be completed digitally due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Her experience was the inspiration for this issue as she pitched her ideas using the phrase “digital by necessity,” and so I sat with Jane for an interview on all that she learned to think more deeply about using the virtual tool of digital storytelling as a teacher, a student, and a medium.

What exactly is digital storytelling?

I was introduced to the concept by Dr. Toby Emert, Professor of Theatre at Agnes Scott, who led the Institute entitled Shakespeare and Digital Storytelling, along with his Agnes Scott colleagues Charlotte Artese, Robin Morris, and Nell Ruby. Toby bases the concepts of digital storytelling out of the work of an organization called StoryCenter (formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling), and he taught us these parameters: a 300-word script, animated with sound, movement, and image as a mode for personal narrative, using the interplay of time, voice, imagery and scene, and the story itself. There are seven steps or methods to consider for the general format of the script. These include: point of view, a dramatic question, emotional content, pacing, economy, the power of sound, and the gift of voice. The interplay of these different components helps prompt deeper questions to consider what a story actually is, how to tell it, the orientation of the storyteller to the audience, and the interaction, purpose, performance, and enchantment the storyteller infuses into the project.

As participants in the Summer Institute, my fellow teachers and I were able to first engage with the pedagogy as students. We explored a trio of Shakespeare’s plays through the lens of folklore alongside lessons on the theoretical and practical elements of digital storytelling. Then each of us crafted our own digital storytelling projects inspired by our work together on Shakespeare.

What was your goal in this Institute?

My initial goals were open-ended. My own research as a literary scholar centers around Shakespearean drama, and I teach it often, so *that*, rather than the digital storytelling, was what drew me in. I had very little experience with that kind of multimedia composition, but I was interested in expanding my pedagogical repertoire. A concrete goal quickly became to find practical ways to implement a digital storytelling project in my classes. While I do integrate personal writing projects into some of my classes at Bard Academy and Bard College at Simon's Rock, it is more common that my students are engaging with specific texts and/or analytical questions in their writing, and I wondered where digital storytelling could fit in. In giving us our assignment, though, Toby suggested multiple avenues through which to bring together digital storytellers' approach into dialogue with Shakespeare, ranging from personal narratives inspired by the plays to research-based informational "stories."

Coming out of the Institute, I was especially interested to explore the ways in which personal narrative in digital storytelling format could be embedded in textual evidence and help facilitate close reading.

Can you give an example of this embedding?

Yes. One example that was really compelling came from a Fellow in my cohort whose project was very much in the vein of personal narrative but explored control and eating disorders, the idea of "self-taming," by identifying with Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*. My own approach was kind of at the opposite end of the spectrum, in that rather than taking a personal narrative approach, I tried to think about teaching as a kind of storytelling; I did a lesson about the Hecuba speech from *Hamlet* and explored how it could now matter if used in a different context (figure 1).



Figure 1: Still from Dr. Jane Wanninger's digital storytelling example, "What's Hecuba to Hamlet?" Watch it by downloading this interview's additional files on Bard Digital Commons, or by clicking [here](#).

What were some of your key takeaways from working on your own project?

Working on my own project helped me think in new ways about what composition coursework entails. Crafting a concise and impactful 300 words, which was the framework for these pieces, is as integral a skill as building a 10-page paper—and it requires careful attention to the arc of an idea and of the rhetorical/logical “moves” that make that arc clear. Digital storytelling asks them to write in different registers, to have a reflective sense of the goals an essay is aiming to achieve or convey, to fit an idea into a framework, and to significantly revise because of the required economy and pacing. My small group leader in the Institute was a teacher named Nikki Steverson, who had some experience implementing these assignments at the high school level, and I remember her telling me that digital storytelling got her students more invested in the revision process than any other assignment she had tried, and speaking from my experience making my own project, that resonated. The length constraints for the script and the awareness of pacing that came from the audio/visual components made me really aware of the work I wanted each sentence to be doing.

Ultimately, I found myself compelled by the applicability of the concept of storytelling itself, with its implied relationship between storyteller and audience, to the broader project of teaching academic writing.

How did you incorporate digital storytelling into your coursework after the Institute was over?

I incorporated digital storytelling assignments into two courses in the semester following the Institute (Fall 2021): one was a 9th grade Bard Academy course and the other was a 200-level College course on Children’s Literature. (See figures 2, 3, and 4 for examples of student work.) For both courses, the assignment was tied to a fairytale unit. I wanted students to use these as opportunities for analysis, but to filter it through the lens of digital storytelling to explore different means of crafting their analyses into compelling narratives using a multimedia toolkit. For both courses, the prompt asked them to research a fairytale and use digital storytelling to teach something new about it—to open it up in ways we didn’t see or think about before (Appendix A).

I scaffolded the assignments somewhat differently for the different course levels, requiring more writing and research for the college students, and doing organized in-class work time with the 9th graders. As I expected, the level of critical nuance within the projects was on the whole somewhat higher in the college student work, but beyond that, I didn’t actually see a huge gulf between the 9th graders’ work and the College students’ work when considering their finished products, and I thought that spoke well to the adaptability of the assignment across levels. The real differentiation came in the process writing, which was where I really pushed the College students to reflect and offer analysis of their own work.

I was excited about the pieces that emerged in both classes; students demonstrated, both to me and to themselves, their capacity to make thoughtful and trenchant critiques in about 300 words. One notable example from among the Bard Academy students was a project that focused on “The Fisherman and the Wife” and demonstrated how “bad” husbands and fathers in many fairy tales are not punished the way “bad” wives and mothers are. The fathers are powerless in the face of villainous women in the story, which is confusing in a patriarchal model and world. Another memorable project, from a student in the College, offered a queer reading of *The Little Mermaid* that juxtaposed the text of the story with Hans Christian Andersen’s own personal writings to explore how character and author alike processed feeling like outsiders for being themselves.

Fairy tales and the concept of storytelling itself both evoke an idea of “enchantment.” I think it is true that teaching or studying composition doesn’t always feel “enchanting,” but it is also true that as writers we are to guide our readers with purpose to a goal, building a relationship through hooks and transitions and stylistic choices. I found that digital storytelling, in allowing students to process texts outside the bounds of the traditional essay, allowed them to really embrace their capacity to “enchant” their audiences through composition. It also helped them think in terms of questions, rather than conclusions.



Figure 2: Watch Simon’s Rock student Lydia Helmstadter’s final project, “Everything Wrong with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*” by downloading this interview’s additional files on Bard Digital Commons, or by clicking [here](#).

The assignment really challenged me to lead the students through more of a personal narrative, which I’m finding to be a powerful tool for teaching composition more broadly. It flies in the face of what is considered to be formal and appropriate college writing. This marriage of the personal and academic matters as students realize what they are learning and appreciate their progress, and then also make strategic choices about what and why to share.



Figure 3: “An Ambiguous End to Kindness” is one College student’s interrogation of Urashima Taro, the protagonist of a popular Japanese folk tale. Watch it by downloading this interview’s additional files on Bard Digital Commons, or by clicking [here](#).

I found there was an interesting contrast between how the adults [in the Institute] approached this work and how the students did, especially younger students in their first semester in Bard Academy. Students tend to be more self-conscious, and so much of the work toward the project was training and practice in soft skills as well as community and identity building. For a number of students, this kind of project was outside of their comfort zone for academic work and not what they expected in a literature class, and I wanted to engage that discomfort in supportive and productive ways.



Figure 4: This 9th-grade student’s analysis of problematic representation in Disney’s 2009 film *The Princess and the Frog* can be viewed by downloading this interview’s additional files on Bard Digital Commons, or by clicking [here](#).

Tell us about how you navigated the intricacies and vulnerabilities of this assignment while guiding and supporting the students through this work.

In both classes, I really emphasized the celebration of our “premiere” so they could be proud of their work. As we watched the final productions, we used “moments of noticing” as a means of analyzing and observing to remain productive and collaborative. I modeled public feedback that demonstrated close attention to detail and specificity for them to mirror. The goal was to highlight the effects of the specific choices the creators made.

I wanted to emphasize process and revision over the finished product, so I graded aspirationally (Appendix B), asking the students to reflect and consider what they would have done differently. Technical quality was not part of the grade. Students were adept at doing this work using their phones, though using and editing video clips was native for some and foreign for others. Next time I will utilize the multimedia technical assistance offered at Simon’s Rock for support. We definitely found some barriers with file size and software facility, Mac vs PC literacy, as well as paywalls. That was all outside of my realm of expertise, and caused me some anxiety, especially since I also wasn’t confident in finding solutions for them.

What do you think is the value of digital storytelling outside of writing curricula?

Well, I think it really speaks to the porousness of what we mean when we describe a writing curriculum. Digital storytelling is a valid and interesting way for students to process texts outside of the traditional essay, and the assignment helped align students’ possessed skills of digital storytelling (for example those they might use to create social media posts) with the writing and editing skills they need to learn.

Beyond that, it is valuable for teaching a range of things: Digital literacy. Real-world skills around media production. Editing software literacy. Research skills and sourcing. Public speaking and presentation skills, the use of voice and its facile affect. Digital storytelling makes content interesting, sells ideas, and makes content into stories. Students learned to embrace their role as storytellers with skill and economy. The 300-word limit really made them think about what was vital as a component of the work. Then their composition exceeded what was on the page because of the multimedia component. They also became teachers of their work, and that required them to be able to explain it.

We can't overlook the fact that you had to complete the NEH Institute online because of the COVID-19 pandemic, so you were learning about digital work virtually. What are you thinking about now as a result of that necessity?

Yes, the “digital” component of the Institute was initially supposed to be limited to the projects themselves, but COVID-19 changed that, requiring the whole Institute to shift to a virtual format. As much as it would have been nice to be in person, however, the move to a remote framework did help reinforce the ways in which the digital storytelling model helps foster a spirit of connection between audiences and storytellers—and it also reminded me how important the idea of connection through creative work is to the building of an academic community!

Extra-curricular contact is so important to community building. It's true, you know, those conversations you have in the hallway or the elevator or over dinner really build relationships, and we didn't get to have that. But, at the same time, the most connected I felt to my cohort was while watching each other's stories—even though they were mediated through an assignment. While it would have been beautiful to have the in-person moments behind those viewings to more greatly inform them, it does feel really poignant that when I think of the people in that cohort, I think of their work first.

To learn more about digital storytelling and its applications in the classroom, these are great online resources for getting started:

- [Digital Storytelling @ UMBC](#)
- [Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling](#)
- [StoryCenter](#)

DR. JANE WANNINGER is an Assistant Professor of Literature at Bard College at Simon's Rock, where she has taught since 2016. More recently, she has begun teaching in the Bard Academy 9th/10th grade program. Her research focuses on Shakespeare, gender, and performance, and adaptation studies, and as a teacher, she has enjoyed getting to stretch herself—hence the foray into Children's Literature! Along with Julia Carey Arendell, she is a member of the inaugural cohort of IWT CLASP fellows.

JULIA CAREY ARENDELL | Narrowly dodging a life as a restaurateur, Julia Carey Arendell is a writer of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. She has served the mastheads of *The Dudley Review*, *New Orleans Review*, and *New Delta Review* and teaches creative writing at Bard Early College in New Orleans while serving as the Director of the Writing Studio. Her work with OSUN includes advising the new student publication *Global Commons* and finishing an IWT CLASP Fellowship along with Dr. Wanninger.

APPENDIX A

DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECT PROMPT, PARAMETERS

Dr. Jane Wanninger

Lit 204 | Fall 2021

TELLING TALES OF FAIRY TALE

Digital Storytelling Project

For this project, you will build on our in-class work on ways of understanding the fairy tale form to construct a Digital Storytelling Project (DST), a multimedia narrative that combines script, voice-over, visuals, and sound to tell an engaging story. In this case, the subject of that “story” will be your analysis/exploration of some aspect of a fairy tale. It’s a story in the sense that you should keep your audience in mind, and structure your piece around the take-away/critical question you want to leave them with; think in narrative terms. It will also, though, require some research and analysis. Your piece should illuminate some aspect of the fairy tale to give your viewer a new understanding of it; you want to give them information and insight and get them thinking. Here are some approaches you might take:

- Analyze the way a particular motif/trope operates in one story or across a few related stories.
- Compare two versions of the same fairy tale from different contexts/cultures.
- Explore how a particular fairy tale adaptation reworks or comments on the original story, or how an adaptation reflects its own cultural context in an interesting way.
- Explore the way a particular fairy tale has had meaningful significance for you.

FOR THIS PROJECT, YOU WILL ULTIMATELY TURN IN THE FOLLOWING:

- 250-300 word script, which will be workshopped and revised
- ~2:30-3:00 minute video file (MP4), consisting of the voice over of your script paired with images/animation/video and soundtrack
- Bibliography of sources consulted (including, as needed, images and audio sources)
- Process Journal: this document will include:
 - 3 entries reflecting on your work in progress
 - 3-4 page reflection and analysis of your DST project

WHAT IS DIGITAL STORYTELLING, ANYWAY?

“Digital storytelling at its most basic core is the practice of using computer-based tools to tell stories... [This practice revolves] around the idea of combining the art of telling stories with a variety of multimedia, including graphics, audio, video, and Web publishing. As with traditional storytelling, most digital stories focus on a specific topic and contain a particular point of view. However, as the name implies, digital stories usually contain some mixture of computer-based images, text, recorded audio narration, video

clips, and/or music” (from University of Houston’s “Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling” <https://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu>).

Traditionally, many DST projects have focused on personal narratives. *Our* DST framework in this class is a bit different in that the “story” I am asking you to tell is one based on research on/analysis of another story—but it’s related in that I want you to think about engaging, entertaining, and teaching your audience through storytelling, and I want you to maintain your personal point of view.

WHY DIGITAL STORYTELLING?

We compose our ideas in all different ways, and text is just one of them; with DST, we practice thinking about how language, image, and sound come together to tell a story and reach an audience. We also hone our digital literacy and technical skills.

A SUCCESSFUL DST WILL REFLECT THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS/CONCEPTS:

1. **Point of View:** What is the main point of the story and your perspective as an author/narrator? Note: for this piece, it is fine to use the first person, and you could also speak directly to the “you” of the audience if you want to.
2. **A Dramatic Question:** A key question that keeps the viewer’s attention and will be answered in your story. The answer to this implicit question will be the main argument of your piece.
3. **Connecting With the Audience:** The DST should both inform and engage, giving the viewer a reason to care about/be interested in your ideas. Depending on your topic, you might even include some personal narrative about your own feelings/experiences.
4. **Synthesis of Text and Image:** The arc of your story will come together in a written script, but in the DST, you will also use images to make meaning, and ideally, the written and visual material will work in tandem with one another to enhance your story (rather than just replicating one another).
5. **Voice and Sound:** You will deliver your script orally, and the inclusion of your voice is part of the project of connecting with the audience. Music and/or other sounds will further enhance the story.
6. **Economy:** By strategically allowing word and image to work together, the DST aims for economy, using just enough content to inform and interest the audience without overwhelming. You want to maximize the effect you get out of your 250-300 words.
7. **Pacing and Structure:** The question of *how* you tell your story matters a lot when it comes to its power. Framing the story in an organic way and structuring its rhythm so that it can breathe and flow gives it strength. Pauses can be powerful.

Adapted from the “Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling” described by the [Center for Digital Storytelling](#) (Berkeley, CA).

WAIT, JUST TO CLARIFY, AM I JUST SUPPOSED TO RETELL A FAIRY TALE?

Nope, the “dramatic question” you are answering with this DST should be something about an existing fairy tale and how we might read/understand it. If it seems like your fairy tale is more or less common knowledge (for instance, something like “The Three Little Pigs”) you can go forward assuming your audience knows the gist. If it’s less common, you might need to summarize a bit more, and you can include a copy of the story itself so people could read it ahead of time. The ultimate focus, though, should be on *your ideas/interpretations*, not the telling of the fairy tale itself.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A DST SCRIPT AND A SHORT ESSAY?

This script will be designed to be delivered, verbally, to an audience, so your tone and cadence will work along with the words themselves to set the tone and rhythm. Generally, I think the “beats” of a script like this are much shorter—rather than writing in long paragraphs, I have tended to break my ideas up into smaller rhetorical segments. This multimedia composition will rely on the interplay of script, verbal delivery, sound, and image, so you have a lot of dynamic components to consider when you think about how to put the pieces together. You will want to find ways to use the visual or the auditory to complement, rather than replicate, what’s on the page, and you may find that there are things you don’t need to say because you can show them.

GREAT, BUT HOW WILL I MAKE MY SCRIPT AND SOME PICTURES FROM THE INTERNET INTO A “MOVIE”?

Good question! There are a number of different platforms you can use, depending on your familiarity with different types of software and the type of computer you use. Here are some options (and if there are other platforms you are interested in trying, great!):

- iMovie (specifically for Mac computers)
- Microsoft Movie Maker (specifically for Windows PCs)
- Wevideo.com (the website has paid versions, but you can do this project with a free account)
- Powerpoint (this is how I made mine. I was happy with the finished product, though synching the sound and image took some effort).

Once you have a sense of what platform you might use, YouTube is a great resource for tutorials (for instance, I saw [this video](#) while searching “digital storytelling and powerpoint”; there are lots more out there.)

When it comes to mixing sound (recording your voice over and adding in a soundtrack and/or any sound clips or effects), I recommend [Audacity](#).

I am happy to troubleshoot issues with you, and you should also embrace the library as a resource. KellyAnne McGuire, one of the librarians, has taught DST courses before, and she is an excellent and encouraging resource! We’ll be connecting with her in class, and William or Brian could also be good people to consult.

Remember: I know that you are doing this for the first time; it is ok to be a novice! You will figure things out as you go, and one of the main goals of this project is to work on problem solving and skill building through experiential exploration. I would rather see creative, ambitious, thoughtful work, even if it doesn't 100% come together than something polished but unimaginative. **This is a project that will benefit tremendously from some self-motivation and creativity.**

GENERAL SCHEDULE/DUE DATES

Thursday, 10/7

No in-person class. Instead, spend roughly an hour looking at DST samples and resources, and exploring fairy tales that might be of interest to you to come up with a guiding question for your project.

**Process journal entry

BREAK

Tuesday, 10/19

By the end of break, you should have a plan for the topic/guiding question for your DST and have a preliminary script put together.

**Process Journal Entry

Thursday, 10/21

Completed draft of script due; workshopping in class; storyboarding. At this point you should also be gathering images, sounds, etc. and saving them to a folder. By the end of this week you should have your voiceover recorded

Tuesday, 10/26

You should at this point have a draft in progress on your platform of choice including all components (voiceover, sound, image). Work time/workshopping in class.

**Process Journal Entry

[Thursday, 10/28]

Start *Peter Pan*.

Tuesday, 11/2

DST and Process Journal are due.

APPENDIX B

DIGITAL STORYTELLING PROJECT RUBRIC

CRITERIA FOR ASSESSMENT	POINTS EARNED*	NOTES
Topic + Takeaway: The project should have a clear, focused topic, and it should offer and interpret relevant evidence/examples to leave the viewer with new insights.	15	
Structure, Tone, + Storytelling Approach: The project should be structured in a way that leads the viewer effectively from idea to idea. In terms of tone and writing style, there should be a sense that the filmmaker is aware of and speaking to an audience, rather than just reciting information. The script should be thoughtfully composed and efficient in structure, pacing, and use of detail.	15	
Audio + Video: The voice over is clear, with appropriate timing and volume. A soundtrack and, if applicable, sound effects, work to enhance the overall effect. The images/video used are well-chosen and work to complement/illuminate the script. The transitions between them are well chosen and work to enhance the overall effect. The audio and images are synched appropriately and working well in tandem with one another.	25	
Title Card + Credits: Your name and the project title should be included in the film, and you should include credits in which sources are cited appropriately (when in doubt, use MLA style).	10	
Process Journal: The process journal should be thoughtful and reflective, demonstrating engagement with the creation process and an analytical eye toward the project itself. The process journal can also help compensate for/contextualize issues from other categories.	25	
Originality, Polish, + Effort: These points are awarded for projects that are particularly inventive or creatively/critically ambitious. Robust engagement with the process also earns points in this category.	10	

*The specific breakdown of points here is subject to revision if necessary for appropriate evaluation of a particular project.