

Readers, Writers, and Everything in Between

Considering co-creative relationships on digital storytelling platforms

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the notion of the empowered reader in hypertext to think about the role of readers and creative partners in constructing art and digital storytelling. Using the Indian digital storytelling platform ‘Voices of Rural India’ as a field site, this research considers the role of the fan and other facilitators of digital storytelling as being central to the production process. While there has been argument for including the work of fans as a form of labor, I argue instead for calling this a co-creative partnership, in the vein of Banks and Humphrey (2008). In doing so, I resist the urge to label all forms of production as labor and consider instead the fruits this creative relationship may bear. This paper also looks closely at the idea of volunteerism in the context of Voices of Rural India and the ways in which volunteer work *can* become a form of unpaid labor in the context of digital storytelling. Overall, this paper seeks to empower the practice of reading and argue for its necessity and worth in the wider infrastructure of digital storytelling and creative production, while also promoting the notion of creative partnership and shared storytelling.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing • Social and professional topics ~ User characteristics • Applied computing ~ Arts and humanities

KEYWORDS

Digital storytelling, readers, writers, hypertext, labor

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1 Introduction

The way we read a website matters. In reading or using a website, we, its users, co-construct its meaning and its uses. The Internet thus makes writers and readers of us all, encouraging “writerly” or “readerly” experiences [1] and offering exciting new opportunities to challenge and resist linear storytelling and reading.

This paper uses the specific reading of the website “Voices of Rural India”, a digital storytelling platform in India, to examine “community storytelling” in the context of this website. In doing so, I build on my doctoral research in the field of digital storytelling in India. This paper is specifically interested in using hypertext and other forms of digital storytelling as a springboard to consider the relationships formed between readers and writers and the ways this relationship can be conceived of as a form of affective labor [2,3]. However, I also begin to consider the limitations of the word ‘labor’ [4] in the context of reader/writer dynamics, gesturing towards more work that could be done to define and understand this relationship.

Broadly, this paper uses Voices of Rural India to consider several elements of what I term “hypertext culture” between reader and writer. I argue that hypertext fiction offers us a valuable lens to consider digital storytelling websites, and crucially, that the important role of the reader in contributing to storytelling online is one that creates a culture of co-authorship and co-creative labor, or at least a co-creative *partnership*. Although hypertext fiction and its writers place an emphasis on reader dynamics and the power of the reader to seek fresh interpretations [1,5], little has been written about the ways this reader/writer relationship can be conceived of as a form of shared “labor” or “co-authorship”. I argue for a closer consideration of this dynamic, while also suggesting new ways this shared work can be conceived of, explained and operationalized.

2 Literature Review

In his essay about hypertext fiction, hypertext pioneer Michael Joyce defines its difference and uniqueness from print: “Print stays itself, electronic text replaces itself...with electronic text we are always painting, each screen unreasonably washing away what was and replacing it with itself.” Electronic text represents

movement and change, even to the point of uncertainty; content can be taken down and replaced with ease. Joyce also highlights the co-construction of meaning via electronic text:

Multiple fictions quite literally require collaboration by the reader of the hypertext to give meaning to the texts through her constant textual intervention and shaping, her construction of successive interpretive frameworks and her responses as a reader.
[5]

Some of this article does represent an early euphoria and hopefulness around the Internet, and the above excerpt belies that meaning is also co-constructed in print text. As Ursula Le Guin puts it: “Story is a collaborative art. The writer’s imagination works in league with the reader’s imagination...to fill in, to flesh out, to bring their own experience to the work” [6]. However, Joyce’s words point to the relationship between the online reader and the writer. When reading a website, the reader chooses where to navigate, what to read; the website can be changed at a moment’s notice, and the reader, through different navigation paths, never has the same reading experience twice. Hence, I argue that many websites can be read as text, as forms of hypertext storytelling that demonstrate acts of co-creation between site and user/reader. They represent types of participatory media [7]. The hypertext is a means of organizing text that experiments with path-taking, via “multiple forking paths” [8]. Becker traces hypertext’s ancestry in both computer programming and in the more non-linear disruptive moments of “traditional” print, such as footnoting. The website is dynamic; it exists to be read, travelled, navigated through. The path is not scripted; the reader decides where to travel – albeit with some nudges from the platform. Not only can hypertext not be read linearly, there often is no linear reading at all. The reader/user can leave the website and return another time, choosing a different path and thus “reading” a different text, in making different choices.

Here I consider the specific example of Voices of Rural India. The website makes a point of explaining that the work of digital storytelling on its platform is a task shared between editors, translators, storytellers, and volunteers; see Figure 1 for the graphic explanation of this.

Voices of Rural India is not a hypertext storytelling platform, but it relies on the Internet to create links and meaning between stories. Specifically, it relies on the reader’s ability to move between stories, interpret text, and choose the order of stories they read on the platform. The platform describes the way volunteers, storytellers and community organizations shape its stories in Figure 1, but readers, too, make up a crucial component of this chart, for without readers the stories themselves do not become dynamic and active.

While readings are a key aspect of this position paper, I am particularly engaged with the notion of “fan culture” and its important role in the creation and dissemination of creative practice. Fan culture plays a key role in molding popular culture and in generating popularity for authors and other types of artists, as comprehensively explored by Fathallah in her work on fanfiction [9]. Baym and Burnett write of fan labor within the Swedish independent music scene, observing that fans create a presence and “hype” for artists far beyond what a professional label can hope to do on its own [10]. Like Banks and Humphreys, I am skeptical of using the term ‘labor exploitation’ to describe amateur creator and fan dynamics; this implies obligation [4], which is not usually the case. Instead, the authors frame the intimate relationship between creators and users as “co-creative labor”, a term I use more broadly across my work. As discussed, the relationship between reader and writer in shaping digital storytelling is a form of co-authorship that elevates the reader into a writer of text. The notion of ‘reading’ as something that can deal with paratextual elements of texts is explored creatively and interestingly by Antonini et al. in their work on stalking as a form of reading practice [11]. This paper points specifically to stalking as a type of reading and a type of fandom, though it does not use the term ‘labor’.

It is thus helpful to think of this relationship as a form of co-creative labor which raises important and exciting ideas about the potential of these networks for amateurs of all categories [4]. We do not pay readers for their role in shaping stories online, but what other creative and innovative ways can the reader/writer relationship be recognized, encouraged and shaped?

3 Method

This work uses close readings of Voices of Rural India (including paratextual elements of these websites, such as sitemaps), website walkthroughs and ethnographic “thick description” [12] to make rich notes on the experience of reading online. I consider the flows and navigation on websites to consider how the reader’s movement between options and text form a narrative and journey. I spent nearly two years immersed in and on digital storytelling platforms and their communities online, taking detailed notes on the texts they produced and the websites that housed and facilitated them, thus noting the “readerly” and “writerly”

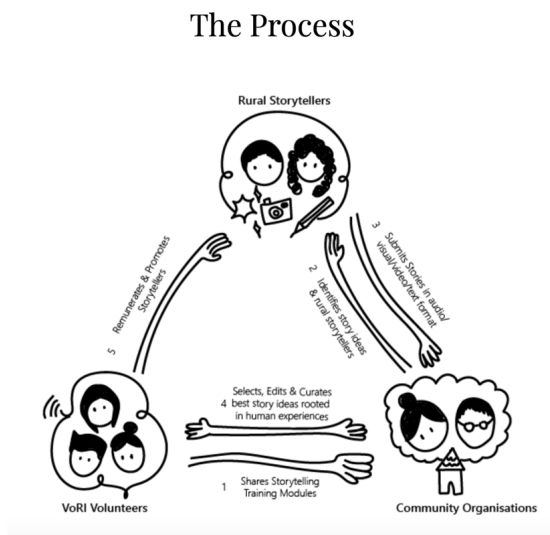


Figure 1: A graphic from Voices of Rural India's website, explaining how stories are co-created by multiple parties.

experiences [1] that it is possible to have online, and the dynamics of labor which shape them. I also interviewed one of the founders of the website and initiative, Mallika Viridi, to understand the platform's motivations, challenges, and goals.

4 Analysis

Much of the work done on Voices of Rural India is voluntary or at least minimally paid. In my first interview with Mallika Viridi, the co-founder detailed the payment structure the initiative operated on:

[The initiative was] driven by volunteers, and the only people who got paid were the storytellers, though [only] a small amount. In the beginning each storyteller was paid about Rs/1000 (circa USD \$12), the second story would be paid INR 1500 (c. USD \$18) and then subsequent stories would be paid around INR 2000 (c. USD \$24).

The small sums of compensation at play here reflect the difference between comparing this work to, for example, professional singers or even semi-professional artists in the Global North, as Baym and Burnett do [10]. Yet even within these smaller ranges of financial pay, there are different levels of equity and privilege. First-time or one-off storytellers are paid relatively little, and the compensation system in place means that those who contribute more are paid more per piece. In this way, the website prioritises building relationships with storytellers rather than simply receiving contributions.

The role of volunteers is crucial to the maintenance and upkeep of the website. In our first interview, Viridi discussed the difficult work of getting storytellers to write or talk in a way that was concise, but still “[kept] the rawness and the heart of the story beating.” One main challenge, she said, “to help storytellers find their real voice.” The website is clear that “Unlike most existing online platforms, the stories of rural India will be told directly in rural voices”[13]; thus, the act of “helping” storytellers find their real voice is one that necessitates the volunteers playing a less visible role, such that the “rural voices” are spotlighted. While all forms of media production make use of workers who are less visible – editors, for example – Voices of Rural India is interesting in that it is the “less visible” volunteers who are more privileged and typically wealthier than the storytellers themselves, who are often from marginalized rural communities across India. While Mallika Viridi refers to the volunteers “helping storytellers find their real voice” in the singular, I would argue that it is the title of this website that is more accurate, in its reference to plurality and *multiple voices*. It captures the sense that these stories are a litany of voices speaking to and in dialogue with each other. Yet if these voices are created together, should all these voices be compensated? What, also, of the reader's invisible role in shaping production and choice on the website?

Banks and Humphrey consider and conceptualize this idea of co-creative production, resisting, as I mention earlier, the impulse to call all forms of such creativity “labor” [4]. As Tiziana Terranova first discussed, this ‘free labor’ in fan cultures is voluntarily given

[3]; as such, discussions of exploitation can ride roughshod over the nuances of these industries. Terranova argues instead that the creative media industry is “always and already capitalism”. Though there is certainly truth to this, as numerous scholars have explored in great depth, I am drawn to Voices of Rural India because it reflects a form of co-creativity and production which also necessitates that the volunteers attached to this initiative believe in its messaging and goals. As Voices of Rural India is funded by non-profit initiatives, where volunteer work is far more normalized, the notion of “free labor” is both accepted and indeed, thought to be beneficial – since paid work would take away from the already small sums of money that the organization has. Instead of highlighting the opportunity to be paid for this work, Voices of Rural India focuses on the potential other benefits that volunteers (and readers) may find in contributing to its digital storytelling initiative. For example, Voices of Rural India posted a fellowship job opportunity in 2023, the first time this had been offered. The Fellow would create storytelling modules for the rural storytellers and facilitate their work. According to the website, the compensation for this role included the opportunity to:

Live for 7-12 months in one of India's most charming mountain villages – Sarmoli, in the lap of the snow-capped Panchachuli! You will be accommodated in village homestays, and your food expenses will be covered.

A stipend of INR 15,000 will be offered per month for 12 months.

Bond with a rural community and experience their organic, earthy, sustainable way of life.

Be part of a team that works on an array of landscape/place-based and community centered activities.

Be part of one-of-a-kind initiative to challenge the status quo of storytelling and setting up a rural community media hub. [14]

This small financial stipend is seen as relatively unimportant compared to the other benefits; living in a “charming mountain village”, bonding with a rural community, and being part of a “one-of-a-kind initiative”. In this sense, the compensation for the labour of being a Fellow is not financial, but rather the chance to embed oneself in the communities mentioned on the website, and to build networks and contribute to something unique. The language here suggests benefits that “arise from passionate interests...[needing] only the intrinsic and social rewards of the social economies” [4]. Voices of Rural India deliberately does not use the term ‘labour’ to describe this work, as to do so would perhaps underrepresent the ‘social rewards’ that are key to its undertaking. In a similar sense, other forms of creative co-production would be limited by the framing of such exercises as driven entirely by labor.

5 Conclusion and further thoughts

I argue that we can use the example of Voices of Rural India's creative co-production as an indication of how creativity and creative work often resists traditional definitions of labor, work,

and compensation, though the latter is important in situations where work is pressured or not voluntarily. 'Fan culture' can teach us a great deal about how people who care about art or an initiative are crucial to driving its success and growth – even if it means they themselves engage in free or poorly-paid promotion. Such a consideration is interesting and important to extend to the dynamics of the reader and writer: if the reader is crucial in shaping work and the writer's choices, should the reader be given a more important role in a text? Should the viewer of an art piece be seen as its co-creator if the role they undertake is significant and necessary to the final "reading" of the piece? Could a reader be listed as a co-author? The latter position may seem extreme, but the notion of multiple authors is of course standard for fields such as academia.

However, I argue that as long as readers engage in their readings voluntarily, there is no clear reason as yet to consider the act of reading as 'work'. There are many invisible and less visible acts of creativity that are part of our daily experiences of both being online and reading; the act of moving around a website, forming book clubs, participating in user discussions around texts as a few examples. These acts are both enjoyable and (often) freely undertaken by readers and fans themselves; these reading practices are part of the benefit of being a reader. The language of labour could flatten and destroy the joy of these practices, which are often social and a means of building networks and community. That said, there are certainly ways that creative co-production can become labour if sustained; volunteerism as a practice has many ethical issues [15,16] and can lead to the production of inaccurate or poor-quality art (for example, poorly translated writing), amongst many other considerations. The 'sliding scale' from creative co-production to volunteer labour is one that can easily lead to exploited labour, depending on the parties involved. Future research in this area should consider the role of fans and of readers in the promotion and maintenance of existing work, and the development of new work, as these dynamics are crucial to innovation and futures of artmaking. The act of reading is a powerful and important practice that, while readily given, cannot be underestimated in its ability to create new texts and give meaning to existing ones.

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