A Digital Project Handbook

Planning Narrative Projects

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Narrative projects often follow other types of research or writing projects, but sometimes they stand on their own. Often the process of developing a digital explanation or presentation of content leads to new insights about the connections between materials or new routes of research. However, **the most common situation is that a digital narrative project will be envisioned as the final phase of another project**, whether that project is itself digital or not.

The typical phases of a narrative project include:

- **Setting the parameters of the project:** deciding on the message for the project, evaluating your resources and available time, and determining the most important features for the narrative output.
- **Deciding on a tool or tools** to create the project and **choosing a platform to host and share** the narrative project, then **identifying people to collaborate with or resources** that can help you.
- **Evaluating the available informational content and media elements** to decide what to include.
- **Creating a storyboard** to sketch out the narrative pathway(s) and how you might use these components.
- **Editing or creating content pieces**, things like scripts, maps, video or audio clips, animations, or diagrams.
- **Assembling the information and the content elements into a unified project** and playing with time, transitions, and other aspects of storytelling.
- **Editing the project and testing it** on a platform like a website or video player.
- **Sharing with an audience, gathering feedback**, and (sometimes) continuing to make changes.
- **Preparing to archive and maintain** the project as needed.

It is wise to think about what stories you might want to tell at the outset of a project. Not all stories are told best through digital means, though you might use a digital component (or the output of a digital component) at many points even within a non-digital project. **So start by setting some parameters to limit the size and complexity of your project.** You will want to identify the story or stories you want to tell, the audience, and why you want or need to make a digital narrative to accomplish that. This will help you determine which components of your project are essential and keep you from getting sucked into a fancy project that doesn't really serve your needs.

Ask yourself these questions:

- **What story or stories do you want to tell?** Think of these as pathways through a set of complex information. You can't include everything, so what is the most essential message to convey? How simple can you make without being misleading?
- **Who is your audience?** What do they already know about your topic? Why are they interested in it?
- **Do you want your audience to do something with the information you give them?** Will you want them to interact with, respond to, or add to your content? Should they be inspired to do something else on their own?
- **Will you be present to add context or explanation to your narrative?** You might be creating a website or recording that stands alone, or your materials might be designed to support classroom teaching, conference presentations, or public talks.
- **What formats or kinds of media do you need to include?** Is your story mostly text-based? Does it use audio clips, spoken word, images, video, animations, maps, or 3d models?
- **Does your project need to be made available publicly?** Will you need to put it on a website, or add it to a library or archive of material?

Then consider the resources you have available:

- **How much time** do you have to devote to this project, and how soon do you need the output?
- **Who else can help you?** You will want to revisit this question after you decide on a tool, as that may change your answer!
- Are there cheap or free **tools or platforms** that you already own, or that you have access to through your institution?
- **Do you already have skills** with a particular narrative tool, media format, or process?
- **Do you have a budget** available to support your work, or do you have time to apply for grants?
- **What source materials or media do you have available?** Do you have photos, video, maps, or similar media? If you do, do you have the rights or permission to use them?

Answering these questions should make it possible for you to choose tools or platforms to develop and share your narrative, set a budget and identify collaborators or necessary staff, and come up with a workflow and timeline for your project. You should **make sure that your narrative needs drive your choice of tool**, not the other way around. It is easy to assume that you need a flashy story with high production values and complicated visuals to tell a compelling story. Often, **the simplest way that you can convey the story is the best for letting the content take center stage.**

Continue reading: [Tools & Resources for Narrative Projects](#)