

A University/Public Television Collaboration to Create and Use Digital Stories to Reach Audiences in the Classroom and Beyond

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Abstract: Faculty and graduate students at the University of Houston have been creating digital storytelling projects since the late 1990s. Building on a history of working with community partners that contribute content in exchange for the design and development of innovative and educationally-meaningful websites, a partnership between the University of Houston's College of Education and Houston Public Television-KUHT was formed in an effort to use multimedia tools and resources to reach audiences of educators and their students, as well as local viewers who could access television broadcasts and online materials. To support the Ken Burns documentary film, *The War*, an interactive website was developed that allowed visitors to view digital stories about World War II as well as submit their own stories that could include an assortment of rich media formats including text, still images, audio and full-motion video. Lessons learned from this partnership and future plans are also discussed.

Introduction

Joe Lambert and the late Dana Atchley helped create the digital storytelling movement in the late 1980s as co-founders of the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS), a non-profit, community arts organization in Berkeley, California. Since the early 1990s, the CDS has provided training and assistance to people interested in creating and sharing their personal narratives (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2005). In the early days of digital storytelling, Lambert was impressed by how easily average people were able to “capture their story in a really powerful way in a relatively short amount of time for a relatively small amount of money” (Tucker, 2006, p. 54). Fast forward to today and we see that the tools needed for digital storytelling, computers, scanners, digital cameras, and high-quality digital audio capture devices, have become increasingly more affordable and accessible. Add to this mix a series of powerful, yet inexpensive hardware devices and software programs and even novice computer users can become digital media producers and editors on a scale that was hardly imagined when Atchley and Lambert were first beginning their work.

Beginning an Educational Partnership with Houston Public Television

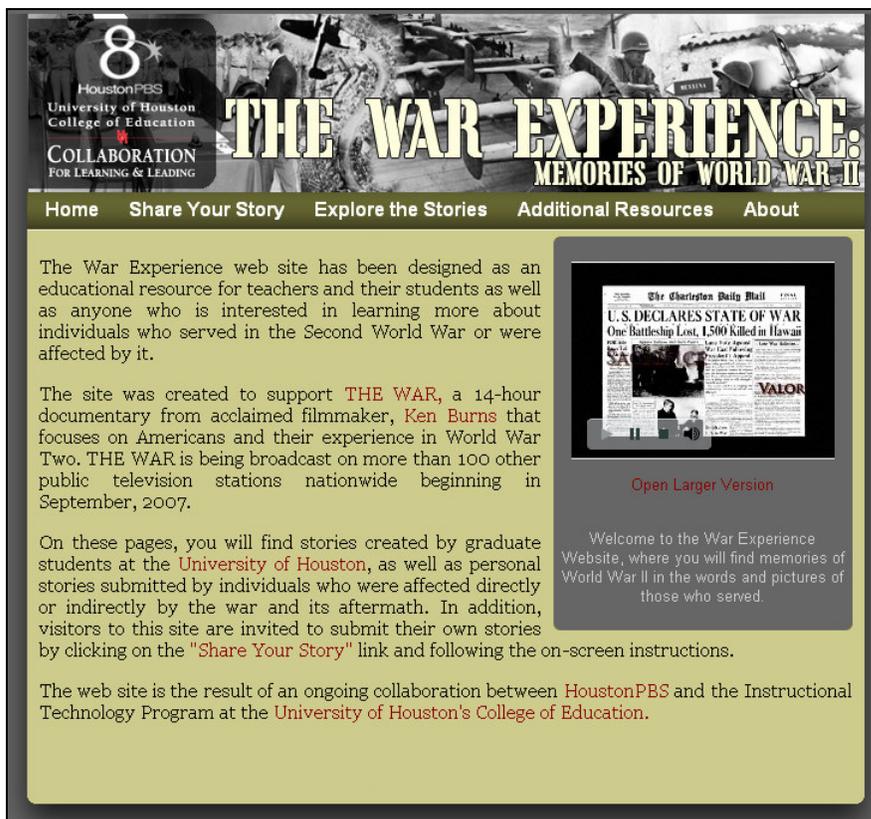
In the spring 2007 semester, graduate students in the Instructional Technology Program at the University of Houston's College of Education began working in collaboration with the Education and Outreach department at the Houston Public Television station (KUHT) to create an educational website to support the Ken Burns documentary film, *The War* (<http://www.pbs.org/thewar/>). The Ken Burns documentary is a 14 hour miniseries that

began its broadcast run on PBS stations in the US in September 2007, and features stories about people who served in World War II or were affected by it, in four different American cities: Waterbury, Connecticut; Mobile, Alabama; Sacramento, California; and Luverne, Minnesota.

As part of their coursework, the University of Houston students created a series of digital stories that focus on people who were affected by the war as well, as events that occurred during and after the war. Some of the stories included interviews with World War II veterans and some were stories told by spouses, children, grandchildren and friends who shared their memories of the war. About half of the students interviewed their own family members who had stories about the war and these students marveled at how they were asked to research and develop projects that centered on personal family histories rather than just the technology skills that some courses are built around.

Designing an Online System - The War Experience: Memories of World War II

The website we created is called The War Experience: Memories of World War II (<http://www.thewar.coe.uh.edu/>) and the first group of digital stories the students created were added to the site to begin the process of building a collection of multimedia resources about the war.



A screen shot of the main page of The War Experience website.

Visitors to our website are able to explore the stories via a series of thumbnail images and brief descriptions of each story, as shown in the figure below.

Featured Stories:

 **My Search**

[View Story](#)
During WWII, my father was a lieutenant the Army Air Corps, that was before the Air Force was created as a separate branch of the US military, and he served in the Pacific during 1944 and 1945 as a navigator and bombardier.

After my father's death, I found that he had kept a record of the combat missions he flew during the war as well as ... [more](#)

 **Documenting World War II: Through the Lens of a Camera**

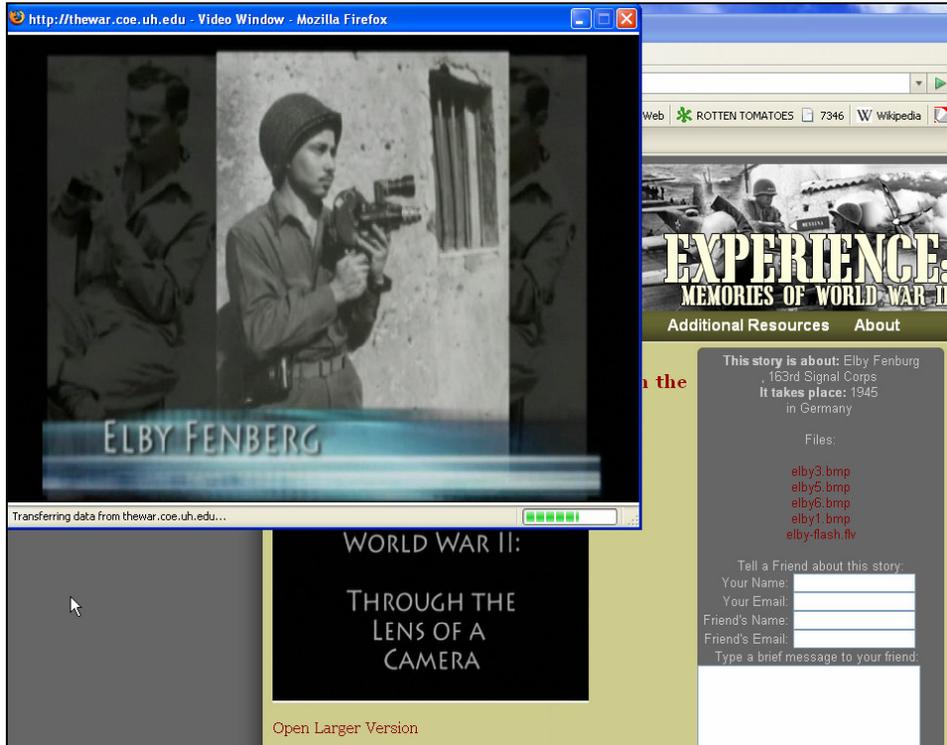
[View Story](#)
L. Bennett "Elby" Fenberg, a combat photographer who served in the 163rd division of the Signal Corps of the Army during World War II, is known for filming the demolition of a huge Nazi swastika at a stadium in Nuremberg, Germany in 1945. The dramatic film shows the destruction of the giant swastika that "was about 50 feet across and was made o... [more](#)

Thumbnail images of digital stories on The War Experience website.

When a particular story is selected, viewers can read text, view still images, listen to audio files and watch video clips, depending on which of these media types have been submitted. We chose to convert all video submissions to the Flash video format (FLV) so that the video clips would be accessible by the largest number of computer users since this format easily works on most PCs and Macintosh computers without the need for additional media players or other software programs.

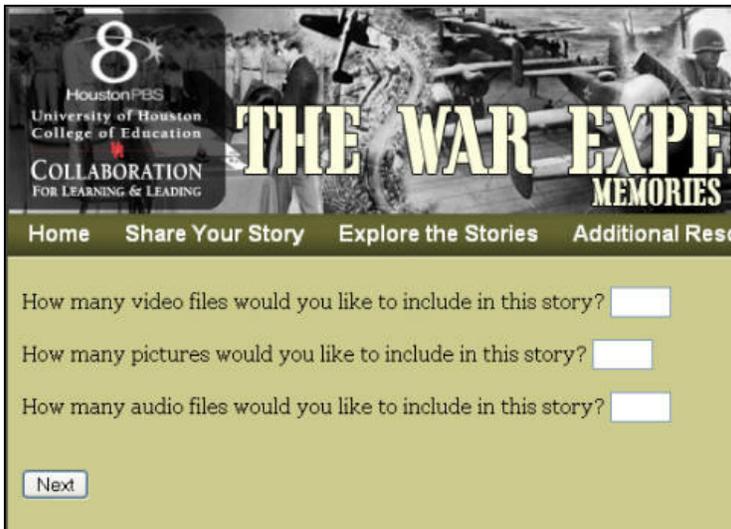
In conjunction with the national broadcast of The War, many PBS stations around the US began to gather stories about local World War II veterans that could be shown on their stations and featured on locally produced websites, similar to the one we developed. Connie Hill, Director of Interactive Education for Houston's PBS station, contacted us last spring to see if we would be interested in working with them to create online materials that would help publicize the Ken Burns documentary, showcase some digital stories about Houston area veterans and provide some educational materials for use by teachers and students. After a series of discussions, we decided that we would work

together to create an online submission system that would allow local viewers to submit their own stories about World War II that would be featured on our website.



Video clip displayed in Flash video format within a pop-up window.

What made our project somewhat different from similar projects that other PBS stations were developing was that we wanted visitors to our site to be able to submit not just text files and one still image, as many of the other PBS stations allowed, but be able to submit a full range of multimedia, including larger numbers of still images, audio files that could be used as narration for these images, and video files that could take advantage of the latest media production tools available to many PBS viewers. This may not have been the best of ideas, as will be discussed later in the article; but at the inception of the project, we felt that we should strive to use the powerful technology tools that were available to us and explore if and how our potential audience would respond. We also planned that the digital stories that were both created by our students and submitted by members of the community would be sent to the United States Library of Congress as part of their Veterans History Project.



The online submission system allows visitors to upload still images, audio files and video clips.

As part of the online submission system we created, we included an online administration system so that both a faculty member at the University of Houston and the HoustonPBS staff members involved in the project could review all materials submitted via the online system, edit the material, if necessary and then determine if the submission would be added to the website.



The administrative component of the system allows submissions to be reviewed, edited and approved.

Lessons Learned and Future Possibilities

One of the most significant challenges we faced in The War Experience website was enticing members of the community to use the new media tools we created for the site. Our thinking at the onset of the project was that local citizens would use the upload system we created to tell their stories, as researchers Klaebe and Foth (2006) encouraged community members in Australia to capture and share their personal histories through digital storytelling. We understood that many of the surviving veterans of World War II we hoped would share their own stories would be in their 80s and would not have access to computers or possess the skills required to create multimedia-rich digital stories. However, we felt that family members, especially young people in a family, would serve as technology facilitators by helping grandfathers, uncles, or neighbors use the website to share memories of the war. Furthermore, we felt that even if community members were unable to use the more high-tech options of the upload system, they would still be able to easily submit a text version of their story, without the multimedia elements. We also believed that adults who did not serve in the military during World War II might share family stories they had heard from relatives or neighbors after the war had ended.

But unfortunately, based on the limited number of stories that were actually uploaded by local members of the community, almost none of these submission possibilities we expected actually occurred. After careful examination of the few submissions that were made and considerable thought, we concluded that there were several basic reasons why people did not use the system the way we intended, and each reason is described below.

- 1) The website was not well publicized to the public. In fact, the only publicity the site received was from a 30 second “public service announcement” that was included at the conclusion of each episode of the Ken Burns documentary, The War, when it was broadcast on Houston Public Television. In the announcement, viewers were invited to share their stories of World War II, and to visit the Houston Public Television website to learn more about the procedure. Unfortunately, the direct link to our website was not included in the announcement and viewers who wanted to find our site needed to navigate a large amount of web-based material on the Houston PBS website, including listings for other programs, information on how to become a PBS member, as well as how to make a donation to the station.
- 2) The technology tools were too sophisticated for the intended audience and help was not available for people who wanted to submit the stories but did not know how to use our web-based upload system. Although our attempt to create new media tools that anyone with a computer connected to the Internet and basic computer literacy skills could use, we now feel that a better option might have been to place more of an emphasis on how easily text-based stories could be uploaded, and de-emphasized the options for adding digital audio and video files. Additionally, an email link to the author was the only online help available to web visitors who wanted to use the system, when a help files suitable for printing might have helped people who were unsure how to proceed. Including the telephone number of the Houston Public Television station might also have been a useful option and the station operator could have collected names and contact

information for people who needed help. It might then have been easier for faculty and graduate students who worked on the project to contact those in need of assistance and attempted to help them use the system.

One option that was discussed during the development stage of the project was to have Houston Public Television schedule a Saturday or perhaps several Saturdays when members of the community who had stories to share could come to the station and get help from graduate student volunteers. We discussed having several rooms set up with laptop computers, graphic scanners and microphones so that people could bring in family photographs, newspaper clippings and other war-related documents to be scanned and then sit at the microphone and record the narration for their story that the students would create after the material was collected. However, the Saturday sessions never materialized because many of the questions about how to make this type of endeavor a success were never answered. Issues such as reserving rooms, getting commitments from student volunteers and moving technology equipment from the College of Education to the television station were not resolved. In fact, these issues were not discussed in any detail because we never found an easy way to invite members of the community to come to the station and create a workable schedule for an unknown number of people who might or might not be interested in participating.

3) Another misconception on our part was that local area teachers would be interested in the collection of educational resources and lesson plans we collected and included on the website. We also believed that they would share their own educational materials on World War II with us by simply placing a statement on one page of the site that read:

The following list of educational materials related to World War II is just a small sample of resources that might be useful to teachers and their students. If you know of other educational materials you feel should be listed here, please let us know. You can call or send email to:

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Needless to say, we did not receive much communication from educators using this method. In retrospect, we might have had much more success had we contacted teachers we already knew, and requested that they help us “spread the word” about our website, the Share your Story option and the educational resources that we had collected about the World War II.

In conclusion, many valuable lessons were learned from this project. Despite not having the success of dozens of strongly believe that the work that was accomplished was important and meaningful from the standpoint of both the website developers and the website visitors. We agree with the assessment of Burgess (2006) who states that digital storytelling has the power to transform everyday experience into shared public culture and is “an example of creativity in the service of effective social communication, where

communication is not to be understood narrowly as the exchange of information or 'ideas', but as the affective practice of the social." Our own experience in creating a digital resource where veterans of World War II and their family members could discuss one of the most cataclysmic events of modern history was deeply felt, most especially by those students who created digital stories about their own fathers, grandfathers, uncles and friends.

If we choose to continue adding new material to The War Experience website, our first task will be to address each of the issues described above. We have also had discussions with Houston area veteran's organizations to have students travel to community centers to interview more WWII veterans and add their stories to the collection on the site. We might also expand the scope of the project by working with additional University of Houston faculty members who might help us find connections in other disciplines outside of our College of Education. The opportunity to work with a greater number of preservice teachers, as well as Houston area inservice teachers, also exists both on campus and in the Houston area, to explore better ways for K-12 students to learn the power of combining digital storytelling with active and meaningful engagement with the community outside their classrooms.

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