

“TELL ME A STORY.”

ARE ONLINE STORIES STORYTELLING?

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## **Introduction**

“Once upon a time—not your time, or my time, but somebody’s time...” That is how a story begins here in the United States. Most people will recognize it. People in Germany might also recognize it, as the beginning of a Grimms’ fairy tale. Whether you are an adult or a child, it brings to mind: “story.”

“Once upon a time.” A professional and nationally-known storyteller can begin with that phrase at the Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee, and all the listeners know it for a story. An old man on the street corner in Manhattan says those words and the passersby, if they pause, know he is trying to earn his quarters and dollars with a story. Children surfing the Web click on a small green icon reading “Hear a hear those words. They know it for a story: like the audience at Jonesboro or the passersby in New York, they would call it storytelling.

But is it storytelling, that follows that well-known phrase? How far away from a personal, eye-to-eye contact in storytelling can a story be and still deserve the term storytelling? Is it always storytelling if it is termed so by a scholar or a person who calls him or herself a storyteller? Is storytelling only storytelling when it conforms to purposes and practices that can be pulled and distinguished from the storytelling of history: the oral tradition? Or is it a personal giving from teller to listener that makes one communication

between people “storytelling,” and another communication, without personal contact, something else?

### **Methodology**

With the exception of one “storyteller,” who tells only online, this paper does not question whether the people who told the recorded stories are storytellers; that is assumed. What it does ask is whether the recordings they have made and which are heard through online multimedia are storytelling, in the same way that telling stories in front of a live audience, eye to eye, is storytelling. To try to answer this question with some completeness, this essay takes prominent characteristics of storytelling from over the centuries (oral tradition), as outlined by Anne Pellowski and others, and compares them with distinct characteristics of those storytellers’ stories that are recorded in an online format.

Before the straightforward comparison of the ancient and modern characteristics were compared, however, there were two other evaluations that took place. First, the web sites containing the recorded stories were evaluated against a list of criteria drawn from a University of California Los Angeles library resource (itself online). Second, the stories’ quality was evaluated, seeing how they compared against one another, how they corresponded with the purposes of their respective web sites, and, to some degree, how well they pleased this listener. A study of stories is always, to some degree, personal.

To facilitate this discussion, more than one word for storytelling is needed. Therefore, from this point on, the ancient and traditional forms of storytelling are “bardic telling,” in deference to Pellowski’s own study of the ancient bards (21-43). Likewise,

recordings will be referred to as “online stories;” it is yet to be determined whether they are the brothers, cousins, or barely related to the oral tradition’s stories.

### **Literature Review**

Telling a story has meant different things to different people in different places and, in history, different times. We know “once upon a time.” But what is that man with dreadlocks doing when he shouts “crick!” and his listeners respond, “crack!”? If asked how to begin a story, how many storytellers or audience members would respond: “This story is so old that no one knows whose throat it first came from” as they do in Greenland? (Skinnar 7). To other people around the world, these phrases and habits say “story” to them as much as “once upon a time” does to us. Looking in detail at these historical forms of telling—bardic telling—is like placing them all in a colander and shaking, to see what rises to the surface.

What does rise to the surface, in my opinion, are two substantial historical purposes for bardic telling: the first shows tellers telling to record histories and genealogies, especially that of the wealthy or powerful; to subscribe to the second, tellers perform to entertain their listeners, both the powerful and the peasantry. This by no means exhausts the list of purposes: many tellers told primarily to augment and embody religious worship or tenets, or to pass time while working, and it is true that there must be as many goals and motivations for bardic telling as there were tellers. Nevertheless, these

two large categories of telling are the ones that we will concentrate on for the purposes of comparison in this discussion.

Both of these divisions stretch from the earliest “traditional oral” tellers to the -traditional” ones, all over the world (Sierra 41). The largest one—that of bardic telling to record and transmit history and genealogy—is prevalent throughout a great overview of historical telling by Anne Pellowski and the scholars she has studied, in her book *A World of Storytelling*. The earliest example of recording and transmitting history might be that of a female bard from the third millennium BCE in Ur, who was depicted (not described) as having recited, with music, the story of a battle both to record its details and praise those who took part.

Other examples quickly follow: the *rhapsodes* of Homeric Greece studied and recited the Homeric poems; household bards in Wales between 950 and 1200 CE, or the *bardd tenlu*, were expected to sing a praise epic called “Monarchy of Britain” for their meat and drink; and the *skáld* and *sögur* (sagas) teller from the early Norse and Icelandic nations specialized, respectively, in poetic and prose sagas (Pellowski 23, 25, 28). Most significant of all, perhaps, might have been the ancient Incan bards, or *amauta*, who were, according to Pellowski, only “chronicler/historians:” her phrase for those bards who primarily recorded history in memory and tale (39, 22).

Though this might seem to be no longer necessary in the United States with all our modern advantages (not only alphabets, but laptops and word processors), it nevertheless does continue in other nations across the world, where there are similar options to ours but the original method of recording information and history is chosen. For example, the *kathaks* of Bengali recite classic texts with contemporary commentary,

even vulgar humor (Pellowski 37). In Andhra Pradesh in southeastern India, the *kalamkari* tell tales from the remembered (and these days, written) texts of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (stories of heroes and gods) not only to entertain, but also to remember them, and in so doing create a bridge between the secularity and sacredness of these tales (Pellowski 37). The list goes on: in Rajasthan, *bhopo* and *bhopi* (male and female tellers) tell *par*, or secular heroic tales (Pellowski 37). Perhaps most noteworthy of all, in present-day Burundi, mothers—not even professional tellers—sing lullabies that are extremely complex renditions of family history over the babies in the cradles, while the bardic tellers sing *ncyem ingesh* (dynastic songs) or tell artistic historical narratives, or *ncok* (Pellowski 41).

Before I get carried away with the scholarly and historical importance of bardic telling as record, it must be remembered that many of these historical tellers entertained and recorded simultaneously; the already-mentioned Indian *kalamkari* were such bards (Pellowski 37). Nevertheless, there were almost as many bards throughout history who, for practical or simple fun-loving reasons, told almost purely for entertainment (though it is important to note that those who told purely for entertainment were often not the only bardic tellers in their respective cultures. They were just leaving the recording to other bards.)

Bards of this kind were not depicted as long ago as the recording kind, but they were quite venerable in their own right; in Homer's Greece, bards who made up poetry and songs spontaneously, as opposed to the seriously studying *rhapsodes*, were called *aoidos* (Pellowski 23). In Wales, at the same time as those *bardd tenlu* (950-1200 CE), the less prestigious tellers called *cerddor* or *cyfarwyddiaid* were busy telling popular

tales, folk tales, called *cyfarwyddyd*, from which it is conjectured they got their longer name (Pellowski 25, 27). Pellowski mentions that they probably were on a par with Irish folk tellers called *seanchaidhe* (Pellowski 27). The pre 12<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Saxon *scop* or *gleoman* was made famous in great poems like Beowulf, and he, too, told sagas or original poems for entertainment, detailing fantastic and warlike exploits for listeners in the mead halls (Pellowski 28).

To wonder whether bardic telling for entertainment continues today is to not really be familiar with modern storytelling at all: this is the thing that everyone knows and wants storytelling for! It is widespread in the southeastern United States, where storytelling festivals like in Jonesboro, Tennessee bring in hundreds, even thousands, of eager listeners. Librarians use it in their programming to bring people into libraries, and poorer tellers offer stories or songs on street-corners in hopes of earning some money. All for entertainment.

Nevertheless, it, too, is international in the present, and sometimes more honored than in the United States. For instance, in the Serbo-Croatian parts of what was Yugoslavia, tellers called *guslari* continue a tradition of bardic telling that began in the eighteenth-century purely for entertainment, in metrical or non-metrical forms (Pellowski 34). Pellowski describes it as the counterpart of the eighteenth-century Russian tales told by men (*skaziteli*) or women (*skazitelnitsy*): the metrical tales were called *bylini* and those non-metrical, *pobyvalshchiny* (34). Likewise, the storytellers of the *Nyangas* (people of the Congo Republic) present tales over days, on consecutive evenings, for food; though the tales (*kárisi*) are religiously significant for the tellers, often they are pure entertainment for the audiences (Pellowski 39).



## Research Questions

And so both bardic telling for recording purposes and for entertainment has brought us to the storytelling that continues today. To compare and contrast today's storytelling, particularly the online stories on the World Wide Web, the large purposes of the past need to be broken down into specific guidelines that can be concretely studied. Four questions raised by those past bardic tellings, that we will use for studying the online sites, are:

- Are the stories offered for entertainment?
- Are they only for entertainment?
- Do they record and transmit history and memory?
- Do they knit together their tellers and listeners as family, as community, or as humans?

Three of these questions indicate characteristics that stories, to be examples of storytelling, should have or do. The fourth (“are stories only for entertainment?”) is an attempt to narrow the first question. Historically, as seen in the literature review, some stories were only entertaining, but most were not.

Before we compare and contrast the online stories with the characteristics culled from the bardic tellings, I think it is appropriate that the sites the stories are found on be evaluated as useful and attractive, or annoying and unattractive, in their own right. For web surfers, the outward attractiveness and easy use of a site will mean the difference between clicking further and clicking on. In searching through the many sites I examined

to find four sites that cover different ranges of online stories and site type, I chose no sites that were wholly unattractive to me.

### **Site Evaluation Questions**

Nevertheless, professional guidelines pulled from a UCLA page called “Thinking Critically about WWW Resources,” as well as my previous experiences in website design and evaluation, formed the basis for both the choices and the site evaluations. The guidelines themselves fall into three simple categories: audience, site integrity, and site design.

In considering the intended audience of a site, I answered these questions:

- Is it clear for what age and type of audience the site is intended?
- Has the site designer been consistent in his/her choice?
- Has the potential for disabled site visitors been taken into account?

For site integrity, these were the considerations:

- Has the site designer been consistent in his or her purpose for the site?
- Are the characteristics of the site that are web-specific (i.e., links and that essential multimedia) consistent in design and, for the most part, to be relied upon to be accurate and working?
- Has the site been kept up to date; if not, is there a reason expressed on the site?
- Is the site easily navigable, or does it take many clicks to reach the desired information?

This category is admittedly slightly different than it would be in most site explorations because the reader is encouraged to assume that the topic of the sites examined will be online stories and, in some degree, that the purpose of the sites is to provide access to those stories. So what the purposes of the individual sites are will not be unduly stressed.

Lastly, in considering site design, I answered these questions:

- Are the graphics (including icons and image maps) included in the site functional as well as decorative; if so, do they perform their function easily?
- Do they tend to confuse the site visitor?
- Is the site design, aesthetically speaking, attractive and appropriate; does it at any time “take over” the site’s purpose?
- Is the site’s text easy to read, easy to follow, and not distracting due to grammatical or spelling errors?

## **Evaluation**

The four sites chosen for evaluation are: Nelson Lauer’s The American Storyteller; Thomas Doty, Storyteller; Jim Woodard at Storyteller.net; and Dana Atchley’s Next Exit. All four include online stories, in one way or another, and all have, for the most part, a common purpose in that they are designed to advertise online stories, their storytellers, and resources for online stories via the World Wide Web. (With the exception of Nelson Lauer, it is not in doubt that any of the people introduced by these sites are in fact genuine storytellers.) I will evaluate these sites first in their success as

examples of web design and navigability, using the above criteria, and then address their online stories.

These sites are, of course, just examples of sites that feature online stories in this particular form (RealAudio or actual digital storytelling), and as such are only examples of the hundreds of storytellers' sites available. Nevertheless, though not all sites can be evaluated in this detail in this paper, there are other sites that require mentioning because they come up under a search of "online storytelling" and do not feature recorded stories.

The primary alternative to RealAudio and online stories is something the sites here evaluated also have: online print stories. Bubbe's Back Porch (<http://www.bubbe.com>) might be one of the most well-known examples; the web designer intends the site for people sharing personal narratives and experiences by sending them to her. She then mounts them, or most of them, on the site.

Another alternative to online stories are sites, often designed for children or young adults, that offer forms for visitors to actually compose stories on the spot and post them to the site. A third option includes storytellers' sites where they provide recordings of them singing or playing instruments only, or mostly. Examples might be the Telling Tales website (<http://www.tellingtales.com>) for writing stories online and Jennifer White's Celtic Harper site (<http://www.knockgrifton.com/contents.html>).

The most extreme example I discovered while I researched, though not online, leads to one reason the topic of this paper is not only interesting to explore but from a storyteller's perspective needs to be explored right now. I have been treating online stories as one of the most recent innovations to be ordered under the heading storytelling. Scott Turner, however, takes a step further, describing a computer program not for

recording stories, but to tell stories (using that broad definition that writing stories is the same as telling them) (2). Turner claims that the program, called Minstrel, not only writes stories (based on a catalog of story options it has in its “brain”) but even displays “creativity” by applying solutions from other stories’ problems to a problem it has never before encountered (13-14). In other words, computers, when provided with enough resources to draw on, can write stories as well—in fact, better—than humans can (Turner ix).

I think Anne Pellowski would see this as a perfect example of what she called “linear thinking:” logical thinking that categorizes, like the thoughts that produced the Greek alphabet in the middle of an orally-based culture (10). That kind of thinking, in creating the potential for “literacy,” forever changed the Greek (and our) way of thinking (Pellowski 10). Minstrel takes one step further, claiming to create stories from logical, linear thought.

Reading one of Minstrel’s stories will allay any fear and jealousy from “simple” human tellers: they are choppy and predictable. Nevertheless, the fact that Minstrel exists and “creates” at all tells me it is time that some effort be made to plot out what is storytelling today and what is not. The question is forced, by so-called advances like Minstrel, to do more than ask: “in this new information age with all its electronic marvels, has storytelling become passé?” (Sager 219). The question that could be forced to be answered is: unlike the online stories from live tellers in this paper, does storytelling exist if it is only electronic? One question at a time has to be answered, and this is not the one in this study, but now that it has been asked, the study should follow.

## Site Evaluation

Nelson Lauver's site (<http://www.theamericanstoryteller.com>) is unique in that it features the one example I am offering of a storyteller, if he can be called such, who prefers telling in recording to telling in person. The site, as with the majority of the sites here evaluated, is for a general audience. What I mean by that is that it is designed for young adult and above in terms of purpose, but would not be harmful to children.

As labeled by the site's author and as is evident to me, the site's purpose is to advertise Lauver's telling and sell his recordings, to entertain through online stories, and also to provide links and information on resources for people who share Lauver's malady: dyslexia. The site is consistent in these purposes. Also, again like the other sites, though perhaps specifically noteworthy in this case, Lauver's site provides little or no special characteristics or arrangements for people with disabilities, with the exception of the resources on dyslexia.

In terms of site integrity—how well its design complements its purposes and how easy it is to navigate—Lauver and his web designer have the most trouble. The problem is that four or five of the links are broken; two more pages have been moved since the links were made, but are still navigable. The guest book form is also temporarily down. On the other hand, the online stories (using the plug-in RealAudio) are working very well and are some of the most important of this site's assets.

The broken links seem to indicate, though the date listed on the bottom is copyright 2000, that the page needs updating. Nevertheless, in terms of general navigability, this site uses frames to advantage so that the small site index of internal

links is always in view. The exception is the page of online resources, but even there it only takes two clicks to find the desired information.

The site's design, in terms of color and text, makes up for any broken links: it is simply colored and very attractive. The background color is the same on all the pages—an easy-on-eyes tan. The text—and there is a lot of it—is maroon or black, with blue-green links. The blue-green is a little startling, but attention-getting and easy to read. There are no egregious spelling or grammatical errors, or any that I saw.

Thomas Doty's site (<http://www.dotycoyote.com>) is similar to Lauver's not only in their common purpose of providing access to online stories but also in that both sites introduce the site owner to the world as a person as well as a storyteller. Doty's site is certainly in many areas devoted to online stories, but in as many it introduces the viewer to Doty's other interests, including folklore, native sketches, and Mt. Shasta.

With the additional complexity of the site, Doty has increased the need for defining parts of the site individually. While the majority of the site is what I would call family-oriented, there is a part of the site Doty has set aside solely for adults. His warning is clear: the stories found by following that link (the Wind Dancer) are erotic or at least “mature” and as such are intended for adults only. Also, like Lauver's site (and the other two, for that matter), the publicity Doty offers for his online stories and materials for sale is geared toward adult audiences, because they have the money.

The site's integrity is somewhat better than Lauver's in that, though the site design has layers and sublayers of information, all the links and multimedia (RealAudio stories) consistently work. The first page consists, as by now seems common, of a site index: this one is particularly attractive, with coyote icons as well as text links. The site

uses frames judiciously and intelligently to keep a small version of that first page's index available and visible at all times. The other, smaller, frames are for displaying the actual information or graphics to which the links in the index lead.

The purposes of the site, as I already hinted, are multiple and more concerned with introducing a comprehensive sketch or idea of Thomas Doty to the online world, as much as Thomas Doty, storyteller. Though this would no doubt have made it a challenge to organize the information desired on the site, Doty succeeds. With his frames, he manages no more than 3 or 4 clicks to desired information, and as easy a way back, and manages to keep the site updated and the links accurate as well. The latest date on the site is the copyright: copyrighted through 1999.

As efficient as the links and structure of the site are, the design is equally adept and attractive. The little coyote icon is the one recurring image; there are other similar sketches throughout the site, and a number of photographs, mostly of Doty. The color choices are fitting for the Western/Native American feel of the site, and soothing as well: a parchment-colored background with easy-to-read brown text and blue in-text links.

And as for the text, despite the fact that there is an inordinate amount of information in text on this site, it also is as carefully and prettily done as the rest of the site's specifics. There are no egregious spelling or grammatical errors.

One of the most interesting things about Jim Woodard's storytelling site (<http://www.storyteller.net/tellers/storyjim>) is that it is one of a series of storytellers' sites linked as a small Storytelling Network (<http://www.storyteller.net>), distinct from an online Storytelling Ring. What the tellers do is fill in a form with the information they want posted about themselves on a site, and the web masters of the network create the



actual site so that it is identical in design to the others on the site, providing the same advertisement/publicity for each teller.

One of the perks offered on the site, for a fee, is the opportunity to have a RealAudio recording of the teller performing, and Jim Woodard is one of those who took advantage of this. He is, therefore, an ideal teller to center on both as a teller individually and a representative teller for the small network on the site.

The purpose and audience for Woodard's site is much narrower than for Lauer's, and especially Doty's, sites. Here the audience is strictly general adult business-oriented, to gain publicity and gigs for the tellers. The story on the site contributes to the same objective, of course, but also entertains.

The network site, on the other hand, is business-oriented as well but, like any business, is not in the mood to drive away potential customers/viewers. Therefore, as well as providing the resources designed to match interested adults up with storytellers, the site also provides a specific page for entertainment (the amphitheatre) and a page for children, with activities.

Due to the professional nature of the networked sites, the links and multimedia on Woodard's site are reliable and consistently designed. That the network provides RealAudio for both the amphitheatre and the individual sites, like Woodard's, is unique in comparison to the other sites I have seen and hence an advantage. Unfortunately, Woodard's RealAudio has gotten outdated, but other tellers' stories are still available (in the next part of the paper, it is one of those I will use for an example.) The amphitheatre archives are also available. Some of the disadvantages of the network in general are that, though the site index from the first page is usually to be found on the left-hand side of

each new page, there is no definite “home” button and, more annoying yet, some of the pages resist being “backed” out of: specifically the online store page and that of the Story of the Week.

In most other respects, the site and network’s navigability is, as I said, sound and professional. The links are easy to see and easy to use, and the network site, though not the smaller individual site, is searchable. The page is apparently updated almost daily, as far as the amphitheatre goes: on that page there is a new story or portion of story each day.

As for the aesthetic design of the site, as I saw in only one other, close to absolute simplicity is key. No flashy icons, no distracting moving pictures—just one color (tan) for the background, small black text with conventional blue links, and the green site map. The only part of the network pages that looks different is the amphitheatre, where the structural design is more fancy: side “boxes” of other colors containing other information, and pictures. The background is also white instead of tan, and the text green. Naturally, the text on the children’s page is larger than on all the other pages. Professionally competent, these web masters have few or no spelling or grammatical errors on their linked pages.

Dana Atchley’s site (<http://www.nextexit.com>) almost has to be evaluated last because of its unique online story offerings. In purpose and structure, it is very similar to the other three: it serves to introduce Dana Atchley’s online stories to the online world, offers contact information for gigs, and does a little to introduce him as a person as well as a storyteller.

The first page is easily navigable with a quite remarkable site index of four links: they are all verbal links but Atchley has coded in mouse-overs for further definitions of the pages the links will bring up. Also like some of the other sites, the site map and its variants is often—almost without exception—to be found at the side of the pages as the viewer progresses through the site. By variants I mean that the small indices on the pages alter, becoming more specific as the viewer moves through the site; nevertheless, a link back to the main site page is usually available: Atchley has an icon he uses very basically, like Doty's coyote. A campfire, the icon is almost always visible above the small site index. Though nowhere does it say that the campfire returns you to the main page (an oversight, perhaps), a simple trial proves its efficacy. The only problem with the small campfire is that at the deepest layers of the site, perhaps where one would need it the most, it is not available and then backing out of those inner pages is time-consuming and frustrating.

The site is, like the others, geared toward an adult audience as far as the stories offered are concerned and when it comes to booking Dana Atchley for performances. The links and multimedia offered work well and consistently: there are only one to three broken links (leading outside the site) and the site is remarkably up-to-date, being last altered on April 5, 2000.

It is the multimedia—the form of the online stories—that sets Atchley's site apart from those of his colleagues: Atchley is the only one I have seen who provides visual telling as well as RealAudio. In other words, no unattractive little RealAudio box popping up with advertisements and distractions, but instead a carefully designed “drive-in screen” where you in effect watch a small short video of a story. Some of the videos

are voiced over—Dana Atchley talks about what the viewer sees as he or she sees it, and some are narrated, not always by Atchley. At the base of the “screen,” Atchley supplies evocative icons with the intent that a person can identify the various stories available with them: a red braid for a story on a red-haired person, for example.

To touch on design a little more, Atchley has a whole little graphic designed to advertise his live program and it is duplicated in places throughout the site. It includes Atchley himself sitting on a tree stump and telling his story in a wild west scenario, with a campfire. Other parts of the site (those equivalent to a press package) explain some of the props Atchley uses for his performances: one is an electric campfire, hence its emphasis on the site.

The campfire icon is also to be found at the “foot” of the drive-in screen, with the story icons, when the viewer gets ready to see and hear the stories.

As for the rest of the site design, attractive or pretty are not the words that come to mind, but the design is nevertheless compelling and appropriate to the site’s purposes: the frames and mouse-overs are used to great advantage (the latter especially in the part of the site called the digital attic, where a light bulb “turns on”). In some places the designs are almost convoluted, and I often prefer a simpler site, but with careful reading and a little guesswork, it is usually possible to decipher icons from background design, etc. Likewise, some of the text is hard to read or a little small in size, but evidences no bad grammatical or spelling errors. For a site that so much resists the usual trend for online stories in producing little online story “movies,” a little confusion can be overlooked.

## Story Evaluation

With these basic web guidelines outlined, we can judge the quality and success of the online stories on these sites, preparatory to comparing their offerings with our already-chosen characteristics of historical storytelling. To start this process, I wish to compare and contrast the kinds and quality of story in two areas: folk tales versus original tales and personal narrative; technique and skill levels in theatrical matters, such as enunciation. When all you have, with Atchley's site as the exception, is an audio recording, enunciation and diction become crucial to enjoyment and understanding of the story.

The stories told on all these sites create a nice summary of the possibilities for contemporary story presentation, online or in person: Nelson Lauver tells his autobiography and stories from his home town; Thomas Doty alternates between folk tales and myths from the Klamath people and stories of his own invention that are similar to those myths; Storyteller.net offers varying kinds of stories, depending on what the tellers tell, as well as interviews with tellers; and, Dana Atchley tells stories either from his own experience or his family archives.

Nelson Lauver's folksy tone and style relaxes the listener so that the stories, charming or full of impact as they all are, can make their full impression. His autobiography is the most serious and painful of the stories he offers; the others are reminiscent of Wendell Berry's stories of his home town, that for the purpose of the stories he renames Port William. Lauver does not tell on the site whether he, as Berry does, changes the names of the characters in the stories from those in the real town, or even whether these characters are only based on the real people in the town.

Nevertheless, the stories are well-crafted and well-told; the only failing is that occasionally Lauver drops the ends of his lines, or speaks so softly that words are missed. It is a given that it is hard to tell a successful personal narrative; Lauver seems to have a natural gift for it.

Doty, on the other hand, has no problem making himself heard, and he, telling his myths or own stories about Coyote, chooses to make a voice for Coyote. Lauver's stories are more pleasant to listen to, but Doty gives his listeners genuine folk tales and those that sound like them, which are popular with children. Personal narratives are becoming much more popular with adults.

The stories on Storyteller.net, as I mentioned above, vary based on the teller. There are folk tales available, especially in the archives for the amphitheatre (the program for April 16, 2000 was an interview with a storyteller and musician, not a story). I listened to Margaret Read MacDonald's version of "The Wren and the Elk" the people who recorded it for RealAudio have set music behind it, which makes it hard to hear MacDonald's soft voice. That story is a folktale for older children, young adults, even adults, but Priscilla Howe tells a story "The Ghost with One Black Eye" clearly for young children. Though the story is not documented on the site, it is likely that it is either a folk tale from a small community or a story compiled by Howe herself.

Finally, Dana Atchley gives us video collages of his stories, most, as I mentioned, with his own voice as voiceover, and one with his mother as active and visual narrator. He does his audience a disservice, and some of his viewers could get upset by the stories which are so open and available to everyone, because, unlike Doty, he includes a clearly adult story with no disclaimer or warning for viewers. The story exhibits nearly full

frontal nudity, with only a little black box where the most potentially troublesome part of the image has been excluded. Nevertheless, with that exception, his stories are calming and interesting, well read and easy to hear. Some feature music behind them and some do not, but Atchley never allows his voice to sink to a level it is hard to hear him over the music. (Atchley apparently composes music for his own stories.)

The fact that, with only very small exceptions, these sites provide professional-sounding and entertaining stories that succeed in being easy enough for viewers to access and appropriate for most viewers means that when the final discussion begins as to how these stories compare and contrast with the traditional forms and reasons for storytelling, the quality of the stories and tellings will not be in question.

### **“Storytelling” Evaluation**

To begin the comparison that is the goal of the whole paper—that between the online story offerings and the characteristics drawn from the historical survey at the beginning of the paper—I think it would be best to repeat the specific questions to be asked:

- Are the stories offered for entertainment?
- Are they only for entertainment?
- Do they record and transmit history and memory?
- Do they knit together their tellers and listeners as family, as community, or as humans?

Nelson Lauver and Thomas Doty offered four stories each: Lauver's were "Nelson Lauver's Autobiography," "Big Wheel Champ," "The Funniest Man in McAlisterville," and "Uncle Harmon's Picture."

The Autobiography is one of the few stories evaluated that can be said to answer "yes" to the first question and "no" to the second, and is similar to Dana Atchley's own family memories for that reason. His autobiography is very personal and more than a little painful or scary to hear in places, as he is mocked or punished in school for his disability, but it is entertaining in that it is unswervingly interesting. The fact that it transmits memories, and that they are true, keeps the story from being simply entertaining; it is, as I said before, a personal narrative and very successful in its purposes. For the final consideration, I would have to say wholeheartedly yes, because the personal nature of the story draws us, strangers though we are, to feel as though we know and can identify, at least sympathize, with Lauver.

The next story, the "Big Wheel Champ," transmits its memories in a very different way from the first, being not only entertaining but, for the most part, only entertaining. The only thing that keeps this comic story of a little boy who is terrified that because his rival for the Big Wheel championship has a lucky rabbit's foot, he will lose, from being a piece of cheerful fluff is that, like all of these last three, the story is taken from Lauver's home county and town. Because of that, the story is telling us about the flavor and character of a town that would set aside its racetrack for a Big Wheel race, and at the same time it gives us listeners a connection with the people of that town and county.



“The Funniest Man in McAlisterville” is very similar in tone to the Big Wheel race, but then it tricks you at the end with a sad note. Nevertheless, it is somewhat to be expected, with a title like “The Funniest Man in McAlisterville,” there has to be something about him that is not funny. So the story is very much entertainment, and you think all entertainment, until you get to the end. It, like “Big Wheel Champ,” introduces the people and flavor of Lauer’s home town and county, but nearly destroys its lovely tone with a last minute patriotic plug about “American heroism.” In that sense, it is doing as well as “Big Wheel Champ” in connecting us, the listeners, with the people in the town, but is slightly weaker because of the uncomfortable sensation at the end that you are being preached to.

“Uncle Harmon’s Picture” is the closest Lauer comes to having an entertaining story for entertainment’s sake, and the only thing that stops it from being that way is that it is still set in that hometown and home county. A little boy buys some sanitary napkins for his older sister, who tells him they are “special.” When special guests arrive, that the boy wants most to impress, he sets the table with the best silver and crystal, and the “special napkins.” The older humor required to understand the joke, and to enjoy it, decreases the audience that will enjoy this story. For the last regard—whether the story in this format brings people together or not—I lean toward no, because funny stories, almost more than serious or poignant ones, are meant to be shared. A funny story that causes people in a group to roll on the floor will only cause a small smile if a listener is alone, listening to a voice from a machine.

Thomas Doty’s first two stories, as I mentioned before, are Klamath myths or folk stories; therefore, it goes without saying that they transmit history and memory, the best

possible kind. The tone of each story brings out information and instinctive feelings about the tone and values of the people who first told the stories, that are transmitted to listeners through the teller. Not only does that have the effect of giving information about the Klamath people to the listeners (the third question), but also in some measure introduces them as people—human people—to us as human people.

Also, like Lauver's first story, they are entertaining but, because of this meditative and historical tone, as well as the content of some of the stories, they are not only entertaining by any means. "Coyote Gets Dumped" is quite humorous what I call an "origin story"—in which Coyote falls in love with a star, is carried up with her into the heavens, and then dropped. Where he lands, he forms Crater Lake: a famous lake in Oregon (that is, it is a mythological idea of the *origins* of Crater Lake).

The second story, "Journey to the Land of the Dead," is all transmitting story and memory, and no frothy entertainment; like the Lauver autobiography, it would more likely be called compelling. A young man has just been married, but his wife dies the day after and goes to the land of the dead. Like a Klamath Orpheus, the young man follows her and tries to bring her back, but he fails. The man at the land of the dead tells him not to worry, that he will be with his wife soon, and his words come true: soon the young man dies and goes to the land of the dead permanently.

Doty's other two stories, "On Younger Daldal's Back" and "Poodles," are both original works with similar style, flavor, and characters to the two Klamath myths; the greatest exception is that Doty himself is a character in them. They feel for the most part like entertainment for entertainment's sake, with the small regard that the "Daldal" story

has a meditative feel from Doty's introduction to it. "Poodles" has no meditative feel at all: Coyote is busy explaining to Doty why he loves poodles so much.

I think, for the third question, that there is very little memory or history being transmitted in these stories, with the possible exception that Young Daldal might have actually been a Klamath character. I have a feeling that the fact that coyote loves poodles because he loves to eat them is indicative of real present-day events in the west: I know that mountain lions eat pets, so perhaps coyotes do, too. For whether Doty intends to make a connection between people with these stories, I tend to think not; they are fluffy and humorous, and I feel little connection with Doty or anyone because of these stories. They are, again, funny stories, and would be better enjoyed in a group, not in a solitary computerized setting. If Doty were telling these stories in person, and only one person came to the telling, he would probably choose differently than if he were telling to a large group; a computer, however, cannot choose that way.

The two stories from Storyteller.net are almost a perfect dichotomy when it comes to these questions. "The Elk and the Wren" is a myth, and, I think, Native American, so it is entertaining but not only entertaining, tells about the people who first told the tale, and gives connections with them and the teller through its idiosyncratic images.

"The Ghost with One Black Eye," on the other hand, is either a folk tale or an original tale by Priscilla Howe, and is, as such, entertainment for entertainment's sake. It does not communicate history or memory, unless it is a folk tale.

Dana Atchley's stories are similar to Nelson Lauver's, at least at first; his final stories are more like stories from a site that I in the end decided not to evaluate for the paper—adult stories bordering on the crass. The first three stories are clearly family

memories: the first about his grandmother, the second his mother and his grandfather's skill at old movie-making, and the third narrated by his mother about the red hair in their family. They are all entertaining, in that compelling and meditative way that Lauver's were, but none are entertaining only. Not only do we listeners learn about Atchley's family, but in the second story we learn a little something about America's past and making black and white home movies. The connections between people are there—between us and Atchley, and his family, in their sadder and happier memories displayed on the site.

After lovely stories like the first three, the last two are a little disappointing; they are almost entirely entertainment for entertainment's sake, and, though they are Atchley's own memories and are funny in a bold, crass kind of way, they are the kind of personal memory that makes the listener say: so what? That is always the largest danger with personal narrative: that the listener says, "So what?" The story that takes place in the bar—the last story—is plain bad taste, and, without company, very few people will laugh at bad taste. It really does need a disclaimer for people, especially children, who might happen on this site unawares. These stories do not make good connections among people.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

So, in the face of years of oral tradition and the characteristics of those stories, do these websites provide their visitors with storytelling, or simply online stories? On the face of it, the conclusion is clear: according to primary characteristics from Sierra's "traditional oral narrators," these online stories are storytelling. Like the old stories

studied in this essay, they do entertain and, with some small exceptions, they do transmit memory and history.

On the face of it. Perhaps it will seem strange to some readers that I did not list other people's definitions of storytelling, not even Pellowski's, from whose work I drew so much wealth for this paper. She, like many other scholars of storytelling, does offer a definition as the basis for discussion.

One reason for not offering one at the beginning of this paper would be the fact that it is what I was working toward for a conclusion: that any definition offered at the beginning would have to be altered by the end to include the now-shared characteristics between the brothers, oral tradition and online storytelling. The terms used to facilitate the discussion throughout the paper ("bardic telling" and "online stories") can now be set aside.

Nevertheless, I had another reason for not starting with anyone's definition of storytelling, and it is because of one word—one idea—that the majority of them contains. I bring it up now, not to throw away the research or invalidate the conclusions reached by this paper, but to bring to light an assumption that has been hiding behind all the work done here. It is an assumption that is so basic that to put it in the list of research questions would mean rendering discussion of them moot, and those original questions, like the question Scott Turner raises about whether we even need humans to tell stories, needed to be explored.

But it would not be a work of honest scholarship on this topic to leave the assumption unquestioned and so I will at this point list some definitions of, or scholarly

opinions on, storytelling that will unmask a genuine problem in the treatment of online storytelling as brother to oral tradition.

Anne Pellowski: storytelling is “the entire context of a moment when oral narration of stories in verse and/or prose, is performed or led by one person before a live audience” (18).

In a discussion of folk tradition, David Buchan: folk tradition is “transmitted by word of mouth” (2). (Like the phrase oral tradition, coined from Sierra’s research, I am making use of the term’s overlap, with traditional storytelling which was created by

Audrey Daigneault: “Librarians for years have recognized that live storytelling was the best way to share traditional literature. The storyteller is frequently the first live entertainment a young child experiences” (106).

Elizabeth Huntoon, quoted by David Sager: “But does the computer voice intoning, ‘oh, best beloved’ convey the centuries of oral storytelling tradition?... There is no substitute for the oral tradition of storytelling” (221).

Constance A. Mellon: “...I am convinced it was the power of a loving human voice, the warmth of a gentle human touch, and the rhythmic language... that first introduces a child to the love of reading.... But when the task is introducing children to literature, a machine is a poor substitute for a person” (209).

Or, to go back to the old friend in this paper, introducing children to history and memory, to the words and voices of other cultures. I think the point is clear. To easily evaluate these online stories, I, the writer and you, the reader, made the assumption that it does not matter whether storytelling is live or recorded to be storytelling, and supported

by that assumption, the online stories evaluated in this paper have been termed “storytelling.”

Nevertheless, I think that is an assumption that should not and cannot be so easily made; I agree with these other scholars. A story can be read alone, seen alone, or heard alone, but it cannot be told alone. As a storyteller myself, I consider storytelling a gift, to be given eye to eye and heart to heart. I am convinced that, no matter how good the teller recorded, no recording can make the connection with imagination and heart, that storytelling should make.

The World Wide Web is a flashy new tool, easy to look on as the next natural expansion of literacy and transmitting information, like the alphabet was to the ancient Greeks (Pellowski 10). But it is just that—a tool, and tools are used by living people, not as substitutes for living people. By this token, a recorded story on the Web is like the Hallmark card as opposed to the one handmade by a child: it is a nice thought, but hard to see as the real thing. No children are remembered, after hearing an online story, as crying, “Ajaajaa, ajaajaa! Such happy people Ajaajaa!” (Skinnar 9).

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