Moment

Essays

CELEBRATING THE ART OF STORYTELLING AND DIGITAL STORIES: IMPRESSIONS FROM THE 1ST INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL STORYTELLING FESTIVAL

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Year 1922. Lives destroyed and displaced by The Great Fire of Smyrna...

Year 2015. Refugees, with hopes of a new life, cram into a tiny boat. They embark on a journey from one coast of the Aegean to another in a bid to survive. Yet, for some, the outcome is annihilation...

In Efi Skepetara's digital story, *"To perasma* [The crossing]*"* we have felt how two stories told in a digital story—one heard, the other witnessed recently in our geographical region—left their marks on a person's life. For Efi, "1922 became a reality for the first time in 2015".

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Was it only a story told by a woman from Greece? Or was it our collective story that we watched, heard, and felt deep inside? For those of us coming from the other shore of the Aegean Sea, it was our story. At the end of the story, we found ourselves singing along in our language, Turkish, to the song performed in Greek, as, for us, the song is known as *"Üsküdar'a gider iken..."*

How could a story, told in another language by someone from another country, feel like it is a story of one's own? The digital story *"Without Coffee"* by a Greek storyteller, shown at the opening ceremony of the 1st International Digital Storytelling Festival in Zakynthos, seemed just like the story *"Kahve Fanus"*[4] from the "*Ocakta Yemeğim Var [I have food on the stove]*"[5] Digital Storytelling Workshop conducted at Hacettepe University's Faculty of Communication by the Digital Storytelling Workshop Unit in 2014, or *"A Migrant's Story"*[6], the digital story told by Muharrem, a Syrian migrant living in Ankara, at the "*Young Hopes Digital Storytelling Workshop*"[7], facilitated by the Digital Storytelling Workshop Unit at Hacettepe University's Faculty of Communication in collaboration with UNHCR in 2017.

Image 1: "Without Coffee" Digital Story

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[4] https://vimeo.com/91286225

[5] https://digitalstoryhub.org/filter/gender/Ocakta-Yemegim-Var

[6] https://vimeo.com/218586353

[7] https://digitalstoryhub.org/filter/migration/Young-Hopes-Ankara-Genc-Umutlar-Ankara

Image 2: from "A Migrant's Story"

On Zakynthos, one of the islands in the Ionian Sea, on September 27-29, 2024, the 1st International Digital Storytelling Festival[8] was held with extensive international collaboration, in which Hacettepe University and TED University from Turkey have played an active role. The digital stories we watched at the festival have epitomised and echoed the festival's theme: *"We, the story. Topos and Kronos"*—stories that take us from our current time and place to other places and times. Stories that define "us," tell us who we are; that unite us, reminding us we are part of something bigger. Because as stated in the festival's call:

We live our lives through stories. We make sense of the world through the stories we share. Some of these stories enable us to forge connections, while others enable us to realise our diversity. Some stories help us realise our desire to live together and some stories demand that we attend to social issues that may be outside our individual experience but cause us to question the meaning of being human and what it means to share our planet with others. Each story we tell, hear, and share defines what sort of a "we" we are.

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[8] https://dstfestival.org/

The idea of organising a festival in Zakynthos amongst the biennial international digital storytelling conferences stems from the desire to bring together the international community that contributes to digital storytelling more frequently and to collectively celebrate the power of stories and digital storytelling. Accordingly, this festival brought together academics, workshop practitioners, artists, and storytellers for the first time in an event solely focused on stories. The festival also aimed to bring together this international community with the locals, especially students, and to introduce digital stories from around the world to a broader audience. For this purpose, the cinema in the island's centre, *Cine Foskolos*, was chosen for the theme sessions, with notable participation from high school students from the island of Zakynthos. Additionally, all digital stories submitted to the festival were categorised thematically and shown over three days at the Municipal Theatre of Zakynthos.

Another festival goal was to promote social justice, raise awareness about issues that affect everyone, and provide an opportunity for discussion. Participants were asked to submit digital stories around six themes[9]: "Culture", "Education", "Environment", "Health", "Science and Research", and "Society". The festival committee[10] selected ten digital stories for each theme to be showcased during the themed sessions. This selection was not intended to rank the stories' quality but was based on age, gender, geographic region, and language diversity, ensuring that the stories presented were inclusive and had the coverage to facilitate discussions on the designated themes. Indeed, each session started with the screening of the ten selected digital stories, followed by the discussions led by moderators[11] experienced in digital storytelling and theme expert panelists contributing to the discussion of the theme through the screened digital stories. The active participation of the audience enriched these theme-focused discussion panels.

Our primary impression over the three days at the festival was how challenging it was to categorise these stories within a specific theme. Many stories spoke to the other themes. For instance, on the first day, the first session on the environment theme pushed us to think about society, culture, health, science, and education topics. Statements from panelists like "not only wars but also environmental crises lead to refugee movements and social problems" and "just as we learn to read and write, we must also learn to live with the environment" highlighted this interconnectivity.

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[9] We, the Hacettepe University Faculty of Communication Digital Storytelling Workshop, presented two digital stories per theme from over a hundred workshops we conducted in the past fifteen years. Several of these were showcased during the themed sessions. https://digitalstoryhub.org/

[10] https://dstfestival.org/committees/

[11] Co-organizers of the festival, Andreas Moutsious-Rentzos moderated the "Education" session, Burcu Şimşek moderated the "Society" session, Tony Sumner moderated the "Science-technology" session and Pip Hardy moderated the "Health" session. The "Environment" session was moderated by Federica Pesce and the "Culture" session by Mike Wilson.

The stories in the culture session reflected cultural diversity and emphasised stories as carriers of memory. For example, a digital story from Mongolia featured traditional wooden dolls, each with its own story, underscoring how we have narrated cultural identity and heritage through stories for centuries. Therefore, as expressed in the session, the focus of the digital storytelling community was not on the digital but on the stories and human experience. After all, as John Hartley and Kelly McWilliam say, "Everyone loves a story. Not everyone loves a computer"[12]. At this point, a participant's remark is worth noting that "digital storytelling also made us love technology". Technology has enabled the widespread dissemination of stories and provided various means of expression, making it an essential component of the digital storytelling movement. Notably, some stories showcased during the screening segment were individually produced, not workshop-based.

The culture session highlighted digital storytelling as a significant opportunity for cultural development and social awareness. The discussion in the education session supported this, showing that digital stories can both expose educational issues and facilitate better education and lifelong learning. Similarly, the science and technology session focused on overcoming digital divides, achieving digital inclusivity, overcoming scientific scepticism, and building trust—effective tools for science communication. Perhaps the greatest strength of digital storytelling is its healing power, as well as its ability to empower and inspire, especially in the face of health issues. This was particularly highlighted by participants in the health session, who emphasised that digital storytelling can aid in healing and that the impact of one's digital story can help heal another. The moments when participants whose stories were shown shared personal feelings were one of the festival's striking moments.

Another was during the society session, where all participants engaged in a sort of brainstorming. Asked by the session moderator Burcu Şimşek what the stories meant to us, the audience stated a keyword: *Neighbourhood, fluidity, identity, roots, connection, intersection, authority, expression, memory, land, boundaries*... The sequence of words spoken by a room full of people showed how the stories under this theme connected with us.

As "story workers", how we connect digital stories, whether we can influence policies, and how we can create change were central questions of the society session. Statements made during the session, such as "change is often invisible" and "what politicians can't do, digital stories can", were hopeful.

We watched digital stories from many countries, including Ethiopia, Syria, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Norway, Britain, Greece, Turkey, the United States, Canada, Brazil, India, Pakistan, and many more. These digital stories were incredibly diverse not only because they came from different geographies or

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[12] Hartley, J., & McWilliam, K. (2009). Computational power meets human contact. In J. Hartley & K. McWilliam (Eds.), *Story circle: Digital storytelling around the world* (pp. 3–15). Wiley-Blackwell.

languages but also in terms of narrative styles and visuals used, such as personal photo albums, short videos, drawings by the storytellers themselves, stock images, cartoon characters, stop-motion animations… Listening to a story about homeschooling with the visuals of a house and characters made of Lego or a story about a maths lesson narrated through rap music were particularly striking examples. Using a dinosaur-shaped toy to highlight the digital divide between the elderly and the young or a story about a health issue narrated with characters made of band-aids were among the creative examples.
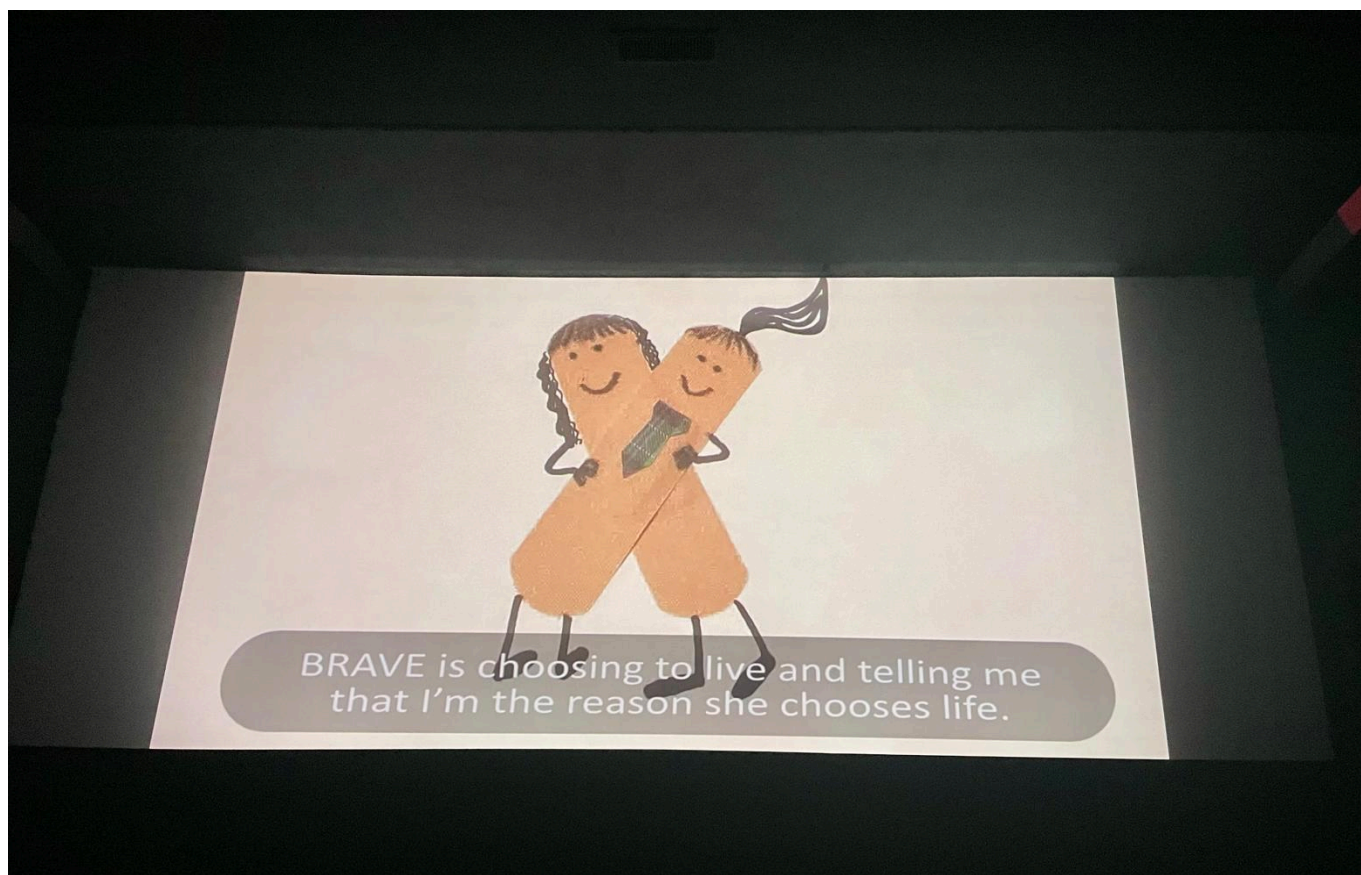
Image 3: Image from a digital story screened in the Education session.

On the last day of the festival, two workshops facilitated by digital storytelling experts were attended by those facilitating digital storytelling workshops in various countries. In the first workshop, participants shared their experiences as facilitators; in the second, they discussed their workshop experiences and exchanged ideas about workshop practices. This process also involved sharing new projects related to digital storytelling. These workshops have provided a platform for self-reflection, collaborative thinking, learning from each other, and forming new partnerships.

Image 4: "Caught the Bug" Workshop session facilitated by Simsek, Hardy and Sumner for sharing the experiences of DST workshop facilitation

As the chairman of the festival committee, Prof. Dr. Michael Meimaris stated this festival offered a great opportunity to understand how the community works artistically and scientifically. Additionally, as one participant mentioned, watching digital stories on a phone screen versus watching them in a theatre filled with people demonstrated how different and healing the experience can be, once again showing us how stories connect us.

As happened at the opening ceremony, the festival ended with an impressive performance. The closing ceremony also featured the announcement of the representative focus digital story for each theme, chosen by the Festival Committee to attract attention to a global issue in relation to the theme.

The International Digital Storytelling Community continues to bring together academics and practitioners in the field through their biennial international conferences. The 12th International Digital Storytelling Conference, the fifth of which was hosted by Hacettepe University Faculty of Communication under the theme "Create, Act, Change" in 2013, will take place on November 6-8, 2025, in Brazil[13], with the theme of "Lives, Voices and Knowledge in a World on Fire", exploring the power of storytelling in climate justice.

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13 https://memo.museudapessoa.org/conferencia-2025/