



Cross-platform storytelling

Tony White

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Feeling the heat of the audience: Tony White talks to Matt Locke about cross-platform storytelling

On a bright and brisk February morning hundreds of people from across the arts and creative industries gathered in London's historic Conway Hall to hear a range of speakers that included visual artist Cornelia Parker, photographer [Martin Parr](#), founder of the online [Samuel Pepys diary](#) project Phil Gyford, artist and interaction designer [Lucy Kimbell](#), documentary maker [Adam Curtis](#) and more. The name of this event was [The Story 2011](#) and it was a sell-out, just like the [first one in 2010](#), at which I'd been delighted to speak about my own work as a fiction writer. The Story is a new kind of conference that is not based around traditional art forms or business models, but instead looks at how people are using our new digital and cross-platform reality to tell stories in new ways.

The Story conference was founded by Matt Locke, whose company [Storythings](#) was launched earlier this year to explore new ways of telling stories. Matt Locke's unique vantage point comes from fifteen years of commissioning work at the technological cutting edge of mass media and participation, initially for arts organisations like Huddersfield Media Centre then as Head of Innovation for BBC New Media. From there he went to Channel 4, where after an influential spell as Commissioning Editor for Channel 4 Education he was until recently Acting Head of Cross-Platform for the station.

Cross-platform is a term that comes from computing, where it describes a piece of technology that works across different systems – such as both Mac and PC. A few years ago ideas like this might have been the preserve of digital and new media arts, but not any longer. So what might this mean for mainstream cultural practice? I visit Matt Locke a couple of weeks later to find out more, bringing him a jar of my home-made marmalade. I ask about the importance of storytelling in the emerging cross-platform environments. Sitting at his kitchen table he tells me that The Story conference comes from his interest in how the cultural and media landscape has changed in the last ten years, away from one that is, as he puts it, 'dominated by large institutions predominantly built around infrastructure, by which I mean very literally the means of production at scale, to one where it may not be easy to reach an audience of millions, but it's possible and it's possible without permission.'

He continues, 'What I'm seeing a lot and what The Story is an attempt to show is people who are using their networks to tell stories.' People like The Story

2011's hit speaker Graham Linehan, the writer of *Father Ted* and *The IT Crowd* who, 'uses his networks of fans and audiences to build and distribute ideas and content. He is on Twitter and also works with a smaller group of writers on [Basecamp](#), all of which runs parallel to the fact that Channel 4 also commissions him to make TV shows, but is not defined by that. He has his own audience and his own projects and can do things by himself without needing to use their infrastructure.

'There are large organisations in the UK,' Locke continues, 'the national broadcasters are one example, galleries and museums might be another, who have infrastructure, but the big challenge for them at the moment is do they also have networks? Do they have relationships with audiences that are more than just the accidental monopoly of a big distribution infrastructure?'

Locke cites the example of author Cory Doctorow – another conference speaker – who he tells me, 'has been writing [a column for *Publisher's Weekly* magazine](#) in the States about his approach to extending the spectrum of what a book means. So he publishes free PDFs, he lets his fans do ebook translations and proofing, yet he'll also publish a one-off high end edition with extra content – a specially commissioned story – that might sell for \$10,000. So he has this spectrum of different iterations of a book that can sell to different audiences, at different price points or for free.'

As a writer myself I can recognise some aspects of this from things that have been happening in my own practice: a short story commission might exist as an [ebook for libraries](#), a piece of limited edition print, a workshop, an MP3, or as an event that can be tailored for audiences and venues as diverse as a local history society, the National Portrait Gallery or Glastonbury. A few years ago this might have looked fragmented, but now it is commonplace, and all of this ahead of what we'd traditionally think of as short story publication i.e. the point when it is printed in a magazine or collection. What is it that animates a project when it seems to be so dispersed?

'Emotional engagement. I wanted people to be reminded of the emotional kick of storytelling,' says Locke. 'A lot of conferences you go to don't really ask you to think hard about how you feel about what you do. That was what I wanted with *The Story*, pieces that really emotionally affected the audience. I want to get underneath all the clichés about engagement. Often when people talk about participation their understanding of that is incredibly technical and thin, yet I know from my own experience as a member of the audience and a reader that when I

love something there is a huge emotional connection there. And I love the fact that we kicked off with Matt Adams of [Blast Theory](#) talking about [Ivy4evr...](#)'

I'd better declare an interest, I wrote *Ivy4evr*. It is an interactive drama pilot for mobile phones and aimed at young people that was commissioned by Channel 4 from Blast Theory and first 'broadcast' in the autumn of 2010. Participation in *Ivy4evr* takes the form of a text message conversation between the audience-member with the fictional (and automated) character of Ivy. This conversation *is* the episode, and it happens in real time for a week.

'Some people at the conference,' Locke continues, 'were really conflicted about this, because the responses from young people participating in *Ivy4evr* are really emotionally honest and open. But for me if you're telling stories and you're not looking for that, if you're talking about engagement with your work whether it's as a brand or a broadcaster or whatever and you're *not* thinking about that really genuine kind of emotional connection with the audience, then why are you doing what you're doing?'

But how might we try to understand that kind of connection with the audience? The kinds of real-time reviewing on Twitter during The Story 2011 seemed to pick up on a theme that emerged during the day: listening. This was put into a sharper relief by performer and director Karl James who spoke about his [Dialogue Project](#), a sound installation at the Latitude Festival and online, in which James asks people to talk about about their lives. He is an exceptionally good listener, and uses this skill to create an empathic bond both with the people he is encouraging to speak and with the audiences listening to their stories unfold.

Locke agrees, 'I think this year was about how you create spaces to really make that emotional connection. I've been talking about call and response a lot, because I think the people who are doing interesting work right now understand how to choreograph a piece of work not using the more linear, traditional model of distribution (you know, putting work out, creating a small space for engagement, putting more work out), but genuinely being fluid in a call and response way.

'I think it's no accident that the people who are doing really well in a space like Twitter are people like musicians and comedians, who work in live environments where part of the creation of the work is literally feeling the heat of the audience. And people who are good at that can create different dynamics in the story, and those are the people I find really fascinating at the moment because the challenge as storytellers is all about that choreography of call and response.'

Thinking of my own experiences, the conversational aspect of Twitter can be quite a challenge though, can't it? I recently saw a major national art gallery tweeting something like: 'If you could walk around our gallery with an artist, who would it be?' And I just happened to see this because an artist who is quite active on Twitter – whose presence on Twitter is all I know of his work! -- [retweeted it](#) with a kind of amused incredulity which I took to mean: but we *are* artists. And he was right, because a lot of the people following that institution would be other gallerists, artists, employees – a whole spectrum of peers and colleagues, not just a homogenous block of 'audience'.

'Yes, they mistook it for a broadcast medium. Actually there's a range of flows, and part of the challenge is understanding what flows you can set up. How do you ask questions well? How do you listen well? How do you make it clear when you're listening and when you're not listening? All these are the kind of challenges for people telling stories, whether that story is a brand or an institution, a piece of narrative or an art work.'

Or the fact that I just made some marmalade, I say, pointing at the jar on the table between us. Talking about something like making marmalade on Facebook or Twitter sends the responses off the scale!

'Exactly! The thing I've had retweeted the most was an [awful joke about Bonnie Tyler](#), but the ergonomics of storytelling are fascinating. [Henry Jenkins](#) has done some really good work on this. He wrote a brilliant series of posts called '[If it doesn't spread, it's dead](#)' where he was basically skewering the term 'viral' as a way to describe the way content is distributed on social networks, because it doesn't take into account the agency of the audience in that process. It assumes that we are dumb hosts, that content flows through us. And his model about spreadability is to ask what is it that triggers participation and engagement and he talks about things like nostalgia, parody, the aesthetic qualities that he thinks makes content spreadable. Your tweets about marmalade would have created a connection with people who follow you on Twitter that has nothing to do with the fact that you're a writer, and everything to do with marmalade and these accidental points of connection!

'This sense of testing is really interesting, because for years ideas of what we'd do online was kind of a rehearsal because there weren't enough people, enough diversity, enough different tastes and interests easily accessible enough to play with. I think a lot of it is in how flexible your creative iteration cycle is: how quickly can you listen and then fold that listening in to the piece of work, and be creative with that response. How quickly you can creatively respond to your

audience is the challenge now. If you're a comedian that's seconds. If you're making a game – the bigger games on Facebook, for example – you can launch features and iterate them five or six times a day. Games now launch with what's called an MVP – a minimum viable product, so when you launch a new game it has about 20% of the total feature set of the game, just enough to get people interested, and then they'll continually iterate features for the rest of that game's life. And that's a really fascinating way of looking at culture – you know rather than think about the finished product. What would the minimum viable product for a novel be? In some genres you can do that more obviously: look at feedback, see how a game is working on line, look at the stats and the tweets and change it. If you're doing drama or film it's really difficult, but it's not about having the shortest possible iterative cycle, it's understanding what that cycle is and how you can be creative with the results that you're hearing from the audience.' He turns the question back on me, 'Do you think you'll ever get to the point where you'd release a 2nd or 3rd version of a novel?'

This is interesting for me because in a way that's what Blast Theory and I did with *Ivy4evr*, we tested the script with ever-larger groups of young people before doing the pilot proper. And by testing I mean that we ran the whole episode in real time, so essentially every sentence of the script had been tested several times, against various metrics and responses and then rewritten, finessed, adapted or thrown out. We tested with twenty users, then fifty, with audience responses then being folded in, just as Matt Locke was saying.

But thinking about it now this process actually reminds me of how I started to find a community and get feedback when I was first writing novels in the mid-1990s, I was trying bits out on a trusted group of fellow writers or reading early drafts on the live literature scene as a way of testing them or to force a different kind of editing process.

'So you were literally in front of an audience getting that visceral feedback. A couple of decades ago when infrastructure and network were generally the same, the only way you could reach audience at scale was if you had the infrastructure. In the last twenty years it's entirely possible to create and own audience networks, but owning infrastructure is still really expensive. But what's interesting now is that if you want to make a business, to make a range of products ranging from a graphic novel to an event or whatever, you can build the infrastructure as you need it. The web kind of makes that easy because, for example, you can use Eventbrite to sell tickets, Paypal to manage payments.'

The tools are there to help you be an active member of an audience too, I suggest. Looking at the responses to [The Story 2011](#), some of the more interesting reviewers were themselves using new web resources like Storify and more familiar ones like Flickr to construct quite [fluid](#), [personal](#) and [creative](#) responses, sometimes on the fly.

'Yes, and what's interesting, and this is the first time I've thought about it like this, is that people are finding ways to turn monopoly infrastructures into services: [Newspaper Club](#) has done it for printing newspapers, [Ponoko](#) has done it for some manufacturing processes, [Resonance 104.4fm](#) for radio. Nobody's managed to turn television broadcasting in to a service yet, but as soon as it does... If from the storyteller's side the question is how do you get that creative, iterative relationship with the audience, how to get that call and response right, what levels of call and response work for you in different contexts, the question for institutions and the true opportunities for partnership between broadcasters and the arts is to ask what does it mean to stop seeing yourself as a monopoly and start seeing yourself as a service.'

Where else is that kind of innovation coming from at the moment, I wonder.

'Actually I'd say three areas: Games, theatre and publishing are all kicking off in really interesting directions at the moment. Games matured in terms of an audience many years ago. An industry that is out-earning Hollywood, but has just gone through a cataclysmic shift in its relationship to the audience from one which was about very expensive, hit-driven, boxed product being shipped via retail stores, to one where an independent sector has flourished. Previously if you wanted to distribute a boxed game to a PC or console you need to work through the monopoly of a Sony or a Microsoft. Then things like iPhones and Facebook came along as platforms and that meant you could build and develop a game on your own terms.

'There's a whole business model around publishing too that's possible now because you can do it in a pay as you go model. You don't have to think, right, we're going to try and run a magazine we have to staff an office, we need to do a 12-month contract with a printer... You don't have to do all that stuff up front. You can do it when you need to. So the business models now are more aligned to flow, you know that [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) (pronounced cheek-sent-me-high-ee) idea of flow: how do you build an infrastructure around an idea as it flows, rather than creating a commitment to infrastructure in advance.'

It's interesting that you mention theatre which one might think of as a very 'infrastructurally heavy' part of the arts.

'People like [Shunt](#), Blast Theory, [Punchdrunk](#), [Unlimited Theatre](#), and what [Tim Etchells](#) and [Forced Entertainment](#) have been doing for years, is doing interesting things in spite of that infrastructure. Rethinking theatrical story-telling in whatever format makes sense.'

What does all this mean for young people – a young person just discovering their sense of creative agency? Does it matter to them?

'I think it makes it incredibly exciting. What's really interesting is how viable it has become to play with infrastructure and distribution in a way that wasn't possible even ten years ago and it's true that the barriers are lower than they've ever been, so any creative artist can just put something on line, but but the question is how does that scale? At what point would you be able to take the risk to publish it and distribute it yourself, or to create an event around that product. These are tactical questions about how to make certain types of creative experiment more and more accessible, how to lower the barrier for anyone to play in that space. How do you genuinely create platforms that can let people scale their work in ways that make sense? I love [Artangel](#) because they've always rejected owning infrastructure themselves, instead finding ways to scaffold around ideas that they thought were interesting.

'I think if you are a commissioning organisation right now that's a really interesting approach you could be taking. How can you make it possible for artists to get access to the infrastructure they need to make their ideas, and some times you can do that in a way that is radical enough to open that possibility up to thousands of people like [Resonance 104.4fm](#)! Sometimes you make it possible to open that up for one person, for somebody to cast a house in concrete, and that's radical in itself. But what you're asking is not how to find a way to sustainably give a little bit to a few people, but how do we make these things open to thousands.'

One of the arts council's [goals](#) around young people, is not just about young people as creators which is happening around us almost regardless of policy, but to encourage them to be critical consumers. How does that work?

'That's the listening bit, really. Not to say here are the things you should be interested in, but to give people the tools to experiment with their own voices and to contextualise and amplify what they're saying. How do you take some cultural production and place it in an environment that is genuinely transformative?

Sometimes that is about transgression. An issue that we're all grappling with because of the rise of social media is the transgression of content from different social registers. When somebody takes a private conversation and places it in public, that's transformative, often in a negative way. Sometimes it's really positive, so your idea can go from a little Youtube video or, say, if you're a young comedian and someone like Danny Wallace retweets you, then suddenly you'll come to the attention of loads of different people. An awful lot of the social frisson of the last five years and increasingly the next ten or twenty years is going to be about us understanding as a society the power of that transgression, about what it means when that is done against your will, when you have no control over it. How things move from register to register is – for storytellers and creative people *and* for institutions – one of the most fascinating and challenging questions now: What does it mean to take someone's content and move it from one register to another? When is that a positive thing and when is it a bad thing? But I don't think the challenges are really for young artists and cultural entrepreneurs, I think *all* of the challenges now are for institutions.'

Thinking about publishing, some literary publishers have been actively taking a leadership role in infrastructure. Faber and Faber come to mind, with the [Independent Alliance](#) and with [Faber Factory](#), but they're also responding to these challenges by creating different kinds of conversations between readers and writers: offering [creative and learning spaces](#), encounters with published authors, or [new poets](#). They're exploring [print on demand](#), opening up their [design archives](#). They're not the only ones but they're a good example.

I think the answers are different tactically but the problem is the same. Which is how do you rebuild your business models around talent rather than infrastructure? So at the moment newspapers, publishers, music publishers, record labels were all created around the problem of infrastructure. It was hard, it was expensive and needed lots of upfront investment, which meant you needed to make certain kinds of editorial calls at certain scales. As soon as your cultural institution is basically tied to a particular form of distribution that has high ongoing costs, then all of your cultural decisions are basically informed by that. What has happened now is that actually you can base your cultural decisions around the needs of talent, and that means two things. One is how do you create different access points into the talent you've built and nurtured already, your back catalogue, your existing writers, your established names. Secondly, how do you foster and develop emerging talent where your role might not now be to give them

the 'golden ticket' in the way that it was twenty years ago. The problem is that most strategic decisions are around the infrastructure that cultural organisations have accidentally ended up being grafted on to. Only a few organisations are genuinely thinking about it in terms of talent and for me that is the strategic shift they have to make. You don't have to be everything, a lot of it is about very strategic partnerships.'

Matt reaches over and picks a business card from the table: 'Look, [Manchester International Festival](#) is based around the idea that every single piece is a premiere: it could be by Bjork or by someone unknown. They've understood where they fit in the spectrum of production and careers and I think that's a really good example. You know, they're not trying to do everything.'

So thinking back to The Story 2011, and my opening question, what is the importance of storytelling in this emerging cross-platform environment?

'This brings me right back to that emotional connection again. I think what's important right now is your ability as somebody telling a story in whatever medium to feel that emotional effect on the audience and to see that response, which twenty years ago you were divorced from. With most large cultural institutions you either didn't hear that feedback or the ways of hearing it were incredibly clumsy: a Q&A with the artist, a review in the *Times*. The capability of story tellers now to hear and feel that emotional response and be creative with the response, to fold that response into their creative practice, is why storytelling is flourishing in these new spaces. So the technology has allowed a back channel of call and response dynamic to return to creative work and that's really exciting. The challenge now is how organisations that have traditionally been structured around infrastructure find new ways of supporting that talent. So it's not necessarily that storytelling has changed in cross platform work or that there will be new hybrid forms to replace existing forms. I think what people actually engage with and value is the emotional connection that storytelling has. And a good story, whether it's watching something unfold in real time on Twitter, watching *Mad Men* or reading *Foxy-T*, or whatever, that emotional connection is the thing that people get from storytelling. The range of ways of that we now have for making those connections and most importantly for listening to the responses are just infinite now.'

About the author

Tony White is the author of novels including *Foxy-T* (Faber and Faber). He has been writer in residence at the Science Museum, London and Leverhulme Trust writer in residence at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies. In 2010 Tony worked with Blast Theory to write *Ivy4evr*, an interactive SMS-based mobile phone drama for young people commissioned by Channel 4 and broadcast October 2010. He has recently written new works of fiction for the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Las Cienegas Projects in Los Angeles, SCAN digital arts agency and the Russian Club Gallery, London. He is also the author of a non-fiction work *Another Fool in the Balkans* (Cadogan), and editor and co-editor of short story collections including *Croatian Nights* (Serpent's Tail). A frequent blogger at <http://pieceofpaperpress.wordpress.com>, Tony White was a compere of the Free University of Glastonbury 2011 and is currently chair of the board of directors of Resonance 104.4fm, London's arts radio station, which is part of the Arts Council's new national portfolio of organisations.