Your house is on fire. Everyone gets out safely, and you have time to retrieve one thing. What do you get?

Most people would probably say they’d go back for a photo album or maybe a journal. What we want to save, more than anything, are our stories. Journals contain stories, and pictures are stepping stones across memory and time to the stories on the other side.
While the world surges forward with brave new technologies, we're left with what we've always had: our stories. What's changed are some of the tools we use to tell them. From oral to print to video and, now, to digital technology, people have been jumping into the house of memory to rescue their stories from the fire that is time.

At the Center for Digital Storytelling, I help them do it.

Stories about Storytellers
We listen, and we speak. We read, and then we write. We watch TV, and...then we watch some more. In the early 1990s, video-editing capabilities became standard on personal computers. This gave more and more people—not just a select group of wealthy media moguls—the ability, in essence, to make TV. Finally, people had access to a set of tools that would let them speak in the language in which they were being spoken to. It's no coincidence that the Center for Digital Storytelling was founded in 1994.

Since then, many individuals and communities have used the term digital storytelling to describe a wide variety of new media production practices. In our curriculum, a digital story is a short (about three minutes) personal documentary composed of a voiceover, the author's pictures or video, and sometimes music. Our approach emphasizes personal voice and facilitative teaching methods.

Over the past 18 years, we've helped close to 20,000 people make digital stories in our workshops. These workshops provide both training in video editing tools and extensive support as we help people find stories from their life experiences and tell them in ways that are effective, engaging, and profound. Some people talk about their battle with cancer; foster youth talk about their experiences in the system; adolescents talk about becoming adults; witnesses and survivors of domestic violence talk through their trauma, and hopefully, resurrection. There are stories about scars, cakes, trips, hopes, friends, spiders, teachers—but ultimately the stories are about the people telling them. And these are stories that have never been heard, at least not by large audiences.

Sure, there are documentaries about people's lives. But in documentary work, a filmmaker goes into someone's life, shoots a bunch of footage, and pieces together a story from all the reels of tape. There are probably a hundred different stories that could be told from all the footage they've shot and all the interviews they've captured. And the filmmaker ultimately decides which is most important.

But in digital storytelling, because you've learned the tools yourself, all of the decisions about what the story is and what is most important stay with you, the person who lived it. You write the story. You record your voice. You scan in your pictures. You capture your video. You choose the music (or make your own). You edit the movie. You're a digital storyteller.

Back to the Basics
While mastering the tools is important in digital storytelling, that is really just a first step. Once people have the ability to speak digitally, they often need help in figuring out what to say. It's usually the “storytelling” part of digital storytelling that people find most difficult. At the end of the day, it's you and a blank sheet of paper, or blank track in the video editing software. And you need to find a way to fill it...and fill it with something good.

I am still amazed how many people come to our workshops with the idea that learning the software tools will be the hardest part of their three days with us. Then, when it comes time to talk with the group about what they'll actually make during the workshop, what story they'll choose out of the million possible stories they have inside them, they stumble for words. “But I don't have any story to tell,” they say.

Many people think of a “story” as something beyond what we tell each other all the time. Others believe that their experiences aren't worthy of being broadcast, that they couldn't possibly matter to anyone else, especially people who don't know them. But they do.

When people start thinking about telling a story to a broad audience, they tend to write their stories in very general language “so they'll apply to everyone.” But audiences hold onto details of
stories: how the smell of cauliflower takes you back to summers spent on your uncle’s farm, how your mother’s veins looked like blue worms beneath her white hospital gown, how you kept a small gold coin in your pocket for five years. We work with workshop participants to help them identify and remember important moments in their life and the details surrounding those memories as well. Sometimes we ask lots of questions, but other times people find that the details just come out when they sit and think about something for three days.

That’s why none of our facilitators have a background in technology. We’re writers and actors, artists and social workers. We pick up the technology along the way, maybe like you do, when we need a new tool.

**Staying Power**

At first, most people who made digital stories took them home, maybe showed them to friends, and put them on a shelf. Now, 18 years later, digital stories are broadcast online, podcasted, and even shown on TV. Now, a statement about yourself, your experiences, and your life becomes a dialogue, not only between you and yourself, but between you and the people who listen to you. Stories beget more stories.

But why make digital stories? Why not just write down a story, or tell it to a friend?

Think of how you dreamt last night—not what, but how. Did you dream only in sound? Did you dream in text on paper? Probably not. You dreamt in video: moving images and sound and voice. Digital stories are told in the language of our imagination, of our dreams.

Digital stories also allow us to develop complex narratives. While text on paper may be an excellent medium for certain stories, other stories may benefit from visual elements, like a leaf drifting in the wind, and audio elements, like the sound of the freeway at night or your voice cracking when you read a certain line. These stories challenge us to develop different channels of narrative running concurrently in a story, all trying to fit together and complement one another.

And digital stories live on. Dana Atchley, one of the fathers of the modern digital storytelling movement, died a few years ago. I play his stories all the time. His voice fills the classrooms I teach in. He is, for three minutes at a time, in the room with me, alive again.

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**Daniel Weinshenker** is the director of the Denver office of the Center for Digital Storytelling. Daniel has been writing, telling, and listening to stories his whole life. To see some digital stories, go to www.storycenter.org/stories.

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**MARION**

A Case Study In The Power Of Stories

A couple years ago I got the chance to work at an urban middle school in Denver. That’s where I met Marion, one of the participants in an after-school digital storytelling club I was helping to run.

Marion wanted to tell a story about how he liked a certain video game in which you could fly a plane; it was a flight simulator of sorts. His initial story went something like this: I like this video game. The end.

But when I talked more with him, he told me that although he had never been on an airplane, he had a long history with flying. He built model planes for years; he knew the difference between a 737 and a 747; and his father had been in the Air Force, although his poor vision prevented him from flying. Marion used to sneak into the hall closet and try on his dad’s leather flight jacket and his Air Force cap. I asked him what it would mean to him to be able to do what his dad was never able to do himself. He sat down to write a second draft of his script. Needless to say, it was far different from the video game story he had started with. It was a story of understanding, of history, of growth.

After the workshop, I found a pilot who was willing to take a couple of the kids from the class up in a two-seater airplane. Marion was one of them. It was the first time any of them had ever been on a plane.

A few years later, I saw him again. He was 16, and two years away from getting his pilot’s license. Last year I heard he was in the Air Force, flying a plane, of course.

His story is a reminder that while learning the tools of digital media is important, sometimes what’s more important are the stories we choose to tell about ourselves and the impact that reflection has on the decisions we make after the story is told. Authoring your own life is more than just about telling what happened; it’s about saying what will happen as well.

—Daniel Weinshenker

**ABOUT THE CENTER FOR DIGITAL STORYTELLING**

The Center for Digital Storytelling is a California-based nonprofit 501(c)3 arts organization rooted in the art of personal storytelling. CDS staff assist young people and adults in using the tools of digital media to craft, record, share, and value the stories of individuals and communities, in ways that improve all our lives. CDS regularly offers workshops in digital storytelling. For more information: www.storycenter.org/workshops.html.