



Applying Black Feminist Technopractice in Digital Storytelling at Cultural Sites

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Abstract. We have been habituated to a type of story about Black American experience, and this habituation – the idea that we know a story before we encounter it – can influence how we embark on creating digital narratives for Black cultural and historic sites. The promise of digital media is that we might be able to tell fuller and richer stories; however, technical affordances can place the story in service of technology instead of the story being guided along by technology. Therefore, the ethical dilemma is how can a project, where agency and meaning-making are central concepts for success, be created for a topic that designers actually know little about? Cultural sensitivities need to be considered for digitally mediated cultural and historic environments and unintentional harm to both the story and the people who will come in contact with it can occur if adjustments are not made throughout the design process. These sensitivities will inevitably affect the scope of agency and meaning-making because the variables within the story are more fixed. While technological affordances can help remediate story habituation, in order to avoid some of the pitfalls of harmful storytelling, makers should consider theoretical frameworks to guide their practice. This essay proposes Black Feminist Technopractice as a theoretical framework to guide methods in creating interactive narratives for Black cultural sites. Black feminist technopractice is a theoretical framework that guides practices and essentially combines Black feminist design (researchers) and Black technoculture (participants) into a technopractice.

Keywords: Cultural narratives · Black feminist technopractice · Agency

1 Introduction

It's the 1960s and a well-dressed, visibly humble Black man wants to eat lunch. He attempts to eat at a local restaurant where he is rebuked by an increasingly aggressive and even violent white crowd led by a segregationist owner. Communal outrage ensues that eventually brings about a charismatic leader, or maybe said well-dressed and visibly humble man is led to become one himself. Eventually, this leader and his followers' actions bring about legal and ethical change. The once hostile white staff and owner recede into the periphery of the story. Eventually, said well-dressed and visibly humble Black man is able to enter the formerly hostile environment to enjoy a sandwich and maybe even a milkshake. Racism is fixed, hooray!

This is a basic storyline that permeates storytelling about the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The historical tropes surrounding the Civil Rights Movement allow people to think that they know the story, even before encountering the specifics of the story. Some of us who have a stake in knowing more about the Civil Rights Movement understand that this frame of storytelling is trite and seldom tells the whole story and that this type of storytelling has disappeared the work of women, queer, and ordinary working-class people from history. This narrative also foregrounds the importance of visualizing physical violence against Black people as integral to the storytelling process. Furthermore, this storytelling tells incomplete endings that eliminate the complexities of the outcomes of these actions. What if we learned that the well-dressed, humble Black man was not one but several young men *and* women? What if these people were part of a larger system of organizations that had been part of a multi-year, multi-faceted set of organized desegregation activities? What if that group of people was approached by the attorney general of the United States and encouraged to continue said actions? What if they never wanted to eat at the restaurant at all? What if the hostile owner became governor?

The stories that we are used to consuming about Black Americans in general, and the Civil Rights Movement specifically, lead makers towards habituation of storytelling praxis. Answering these questions complicates what we think we know about history, but more importantly, it gives practitioners the opportunity to use the affordances of digital media in a manner that disrupts the habituation in order to tell fuller and richer stories.

This paper is guided by my own experience of doing historical research for an interactive digital narrative project on a pivotal anti-segregation action that is a part of Civil Rights history much like the one described above. The project that I worked on is a site-specific augmented reality storytelling project, meaning it is situated on or very close to the actual site where Civil Rights protests took place. The stated goal of the project is to highlight the protesters over the segregationist who was famous and powerful. My role in the group was to conduct historical research to find out more information about a core group of three protesters. I came to learn that the design team, who had been diligently working on the technological aspects of the site for a year, knew very little about the people and the mitigating factors around the events that they were designed for. The problem is that if there is only knowledge of basic history, more than likely, a basic story is what will be told. As I saw it, this was an ethical challenge. How do you create a project where agency and meaning-making are central concepts for success, for a topic that you know little about? What assumptions are created when making digital and physical spaces and how reliant are designers on their own habituations versus that of the actual history or the desires of the audience?

It is assumed that designers have an understanding of the technological affordances and rules of interactive narrative that guide their making practice; however, these practices may or may not be tied to non-fiction environments. By only having marginal information about the story, the power dynamic then places most of the focus on technological affordances, which puts the story in service of the technology instead of the technology servicing the story. This becomes especially problematic because there will always be cultural sensitivities that need to be considered when making Black cultural

sites and by not making these adjustments can cause unintentional harm to both the story and the people who will come in contact with it. These sensitivities will inevitably affect the scope of agency and meaning-making because the variables within the story, such as time and place of activity, amount of people, outcomes, and mood are fixed. To avoid some of the pitfalls of harmful storytelling, makers should consider theoretical frameworks to guide their practice. This essay proposes Black Feminist Technopractices as a theoretical framework to guide methods in creating interactive narratives for non-fiction productions.

2 Black Feminist Technopractice

Black feminist technopractice is rooted in the frameworks of Black feminist thought (BFT). BFT honors the standpoints of the lived experience of marginalized people as an intellectual starting point [2, 5, 6, 9]. Scholars of BFT confront institutional oppression by bringing the stories of marginalized groups to the center, deploying an ethic of care and the politics of pleasure into their projects. Black feminist frameworks seek to increase the understanding and knowledge of both researchers and participants by decreasing the distance that institutional power plays in the relationship between the two. Black feminist technopractice is a theoretical framework that guides practices and essentially combines Black feminist design (researchers) and Black technoculture (participants) into a *technopractice*.

Black feminist design is most evident in feminist and participatory design practice, where scholars such as Christina Harrington and Sasha Constanza-Chock position design as an opportunity to correct power dynamics between design and participants [3, 4]. This type of making engages both the desires and agency of people who can affect stories and how they are told. Scholars Andre Brock and Catherine Knight Steele expound on Black technoculture as existing communication structures that inform technological uses [1, 9]. Andre Brock specifically discusses the libidinal economies inherent in this Black technoculture - these are communication patterns that can help illuminate desires and engagement practices among Black people in digitally mediated spaces. In order to create culturally specific and sensitive environments, these elements need to be deployed together to reduce harm and help create an environment that inspires true meaning-making.

Contextualizing this for the project that I worked on, means thinking about possibly telling a story about Civil Rights history without white people. This may seem inconceivable; however, it can be done using a Black feminist frame of oppositional gaze [5] which disrupts power dynamics, particularly in visual storytelling. With a Black feminist technoscience perspective in the construction of Black cultural sites we would ask, how much physical and story space should whiteness take up when the focus is supposed to be on African Americans? This leads to a centering question where designers should also ask whose meaning-making are we working toward. It must be said that focusing on whites, even if they are positioned as “bad actors” in the story, still centralizes them within the narratives versus solely on the actions of the activists and their work.

People’s attention spaces are shorter than ever, which means as makers of these sites we have just a short amount of time to connect to an audience. Immersion is also an

important factor in these environments. This means that designers should make the most of the liberatory aspects of the story and the space available rather than the binaries of good and bad actors. Centering on the activists' experience can have a more focused and pleasurable effect on the audience. Pleasure as an ethic is an anti-oppression counter-narrative tactic that has been building among Black feminist scholars over the past decade with the goals of moving discourse away from pathology, grief, and suffering towards examining joy and pleasure in spite of oppression. The rubric that I use for pleasure comes from Joan Morgan's discussion of Black feminist pleasure as being desire, agency, and engagement [6]. When we think of the possibilities of cultural and site-specific environments, these elements can inform the types of possibilities for meaning-making and immersion at a site. Reframing a project with the desires, agency, and engagement of the people who will come in contact with the story is what it means to leverage technoculture.

3 Historic Research

In order to get a scope of information about the Civil Rights activities at the site, I searched for information about the scope of the environment around the story, which was the South in the mid-1960s. As could be expected, there was a lot of information on aspects of the Civil Rights Movement, namely Freedom Rides, desegregation campaigns from restaurants, hotels, and swimming pools, and a looming election. Once I identified the institution the activists were a part of, I found artifacts from people outside of the core group at the institution that guided me to materials and information that was important to fill up some of the gaps of information that we did not know. In the archives, I found correspondence between secretaries at different organizations that talked about magazine articles that I had not previously identified. I also found audio recordings of lectures by professors who empathized with Black activists. These recordings were affirming the activities by students and other activists during the exact time period where the Civil Rights actions were taking place. While I tried, I was unable to connect with the actual participants or their families due to the deaths of the core participants. However, I was able to find first-person accounts, including memoirs, and a final thesis paper from one of the key participants. Oral histories from activists that were not in the core group of activists but had previously targeted the segregationist years prior added context to why the particular restaurant was a target. By taking the time and doing more digging, I was able to come up with more audio, video, and photographic archival materials that could be used at the site or other platforms that could enrich the digital narrative about the action, the city, and people involved.

Ultimately, research led me to findings that would impact both the physical and the augmented space. First, it illuminated that the activist activity was the work of four men and not three. The physical site had been created to be a commemorative space to honor three men with three physical markers – the lack of in-depth research erased one of the main participants from the space. Depending on the date of the protest, because there were several, there were larger groups of participants ranging from the core four to at least ten. In the augmented space, adding more people changes how the space is designed and feels. When standing in an augmented space surrounded by a violent

mob, how does it change a participant's perspective to see ten Black people versus four? Using Black feminist technopractice, culling these seemingly disparate pieces from the archive might have eliminated the need to center violence or the mob at all. In general, these findings could change the narrative that had already been landscaped in augmented reality. In the case of our project, the story and augmentation had already been tied to the binary Black vs. white. My interventions added context to the story in the form of short videos that could be augmented into the site as people entered the main project space, or engaged in other digital platforms. While these videos are not dynamic in the way participants encounter and maneuver around augmented scapes, they do immersively ground participants to the physical space and are meant to act as an invitation. Engaging in Black feminist technopractice means understanding core elements of history and thinking of different ways to break our habituations of storytelling to implement them into the environment to tell a fuller story.

Based on the historical findings, implementing Black feminist technopractice could help the designers ask what and where are the critical points of interest, and what narrative is being centered, and why. In the project that I worked on the perspective of the activists was said to be privileged; however, the mob was hyper-present in the space. By having participants of the site view the activities of a violent segregationist and negotiate their feelings about being among the mob centers creates a point of meaning towards the mob and their activities. While the site says they want to privilege the work and voices of the activists, the apparent habituations within the experience actually have all the points of meaning-making at the intersections of the binary that puts the violence on the same level of importance as the activism.

4 Agency

Agency has been presented as one of the most important aspects of interactive narratives and digital storytelling. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray states that “agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” [8]. Likewise, Tannenbaum and Tannenbaum (2010) note that agency is a “commitment to meaning,” both of these discussions are primarily about games [10] but the ideas about agency are foundational to the approach of digital narratives. Even though the experience that was being created was a non-fictional story, the logic of games was present and while on the surface these aspects of agency do not predict a harmful environment, they create a power dynamic where the desires of the designers and game-making praxis are privileged. Without knowledge of the story beyond its habituated state then what can be created is false agency.

False agency in a digital narrative is dangerous at Black cultural sites, because it is full of choices that no one would make, and creates no extended meaning outside of what people feel like they already know about the story. When false agency is present, participants can switch out of the story, because they no longer have a stake in learning about it, and into a game-player mode who is interested in the affordances of technology; i.e. whether or not they can push avatars around, confront antagonists, or move objects. The participants then become immersed in the technology and have no stake in the digital narrative - and this would be fine if we were not talking about relevant

events in US history. Without relevant cultural knowledge or knowledge of the story and environment, I do not know how agency via meaning-making is successfully rendered without leveraging the technopractices of the story and audience that you are designing for. This meaning-making in digital spaces can be fleshed out through the Black feminist technopractice by truly connecting to the desires of the participants [11]. The desires of participants are not hidden. By finding ways to engage with the potential of desire via Black feminist technopractice addresses lopsided power dynamics between technology, story, and participating audience.

One of the prominent claims of scholars of Black technoculture is that the internet is a space where various ways of worldmaking and meaning are constructed [1, 9]. There are meaningful cues that can be found by doing analysis of Black technoculture that can foretell what the culture of the audience (or audiences) privileges when engaging in digital environments. If agency is connected to meaning-making, then being able to connect to some essence of what is showing up can help designers either connect with resonate themes or steer clear of issues that are relevant in online activities. An example of the way agency is enacted in cultural politics and meaning-making is changing online can be seen in the ways people are starting to shift in the wake of incessant videos of Black people being killed by police.

4.1 Cultural Shifts Impact on Agency

Over the last decade, social media has been flooded with videos of Black people being body slammed, beaten, shot, and killed by police. These visuals become commodified as they move from social media into news media, through Hollywood's television and movie productions, and then bounce back into virtual, augmented, and mixed-reality productions. During this period, Black people on social media have seen the sharing of these videos as both important as an element of witnessing; as a way to cultivate an environment where justice might be served as well as a cultural honoring of life. This type of content hit its crescendo in 2020 with the video footage of the murder of George Floyd where no one could escape hearing his cries or seeing him die. Black people were traumatized by this witnessing.

The libidinal economy of shared expressions of pain and exhaustion [1] within the social media feeds started to spread with people (both academically and spiritually) asking if they actually needed to see the footage, while others asked for people to stop sharing it altogether. In the years since Floyd's murder, more police shootings have been caught on dashcam footage, and they are being shared, but anecdotally, I've noticed more calls for these videos not to be shared. Sentiment analysis would need to be done to see the actual change of habits among social media users over time, but what seems clear is the feeling of "importance" around these videos is waning. This marks a new era of a refusal to participate in digitally mediated deaths of Black people and new practices of witnessing and activism around the deaths of Black people among social media participants are starting to be created.

What this means for digital storytelling and Black cultural interactive environments, of course, is a shift in the ways people want to experience Black cultural experiences and how they make meaning within these environments. The agency of social media participants is inherent in the refusal. For our project, a newer member of our team, a young

Black man, asked for a trigger warning at the beginning of the site experience. If we look closely, what is being witnessed in various media environments is an expressed desire to shift away from being visually inundated by pain, suffering, and trauma. Therefore, when we have sites that are dedicated to the Black experience they do not have to always be painful nor do they have violence in them. Black technopractice, again leveraging the design with the technoculture, means that many decisions about what is important need to be constructed that not just breaks habitual modes of storytelling but also keeps the emotional well-being of potential audience members in mind.

5 Conclusion

In the digital narrative that I worked on, the real ending to the story is that the antagonist was able to make money off of signed ax handles that were used as weapons against Black people, he made hundreds of thousands of dollars off the sale of the property, and eventually he became governor. Needless to say this is not exactly a satisfying end and thus most of these details are left out of the narrative. In Murray's article "Did It Make You Cry?" she notes that "we want the characters, events, and settings to fit together in a way that intrigues us... We want to care about the fate of the individual characters and see the events in the imaginary world as fitting our deeper sense of how life is" [7]. Unfortunately, there are many messy endings when it comes to the Civil Rights Movement, and it is an uncomfortable truth that it did not solve or end racism. I suspect and understand that the creators of digital narratives like the one that I am working on are hesitant to engage in a story's ending that is less than desirable. However, this is where the affordances of digital media along with the theoretical grounding of Black feminist technopractice to help bring satisfaction, curiosity, and pleasure back into storytelling at Black cultural sites.

My work is grounded in Black feminism, which privileges the stories of the marginalized. If I had it my way, there would have been far less whiteness at our historic site. There would be more speculative conversations based on artifacts that were found in my research among the Black people to whom the project was focused and of the people and organizations that surrounded it. There would definitely be more points of the digital narrative where the sole purpose would be to disrupt the ways we have come to learn about Civil Rights history. All of these histories are messy, but that is precisely the opportunity that digital media has to offer in digital narratives. Designers need to trust the audiences to make meaning out of a story that has less habituated points across it. Having people walk away from historical experiences thinking that "the good guys won" allows people to think that racism as something that only happened in the past and it ended when Black people and white people could sit next to each other at a lunch counter. These are false and dangerous narratives that serve no one. Using Black feminist technopractice allows participants to use their curiosity to explore characters' trajectories, learn about the institutions that informed their activism, and bring them to the current moment without traumatization or habituation.

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