

A Blast from the Ancient Past: Using Digital Storytelling in “Roman Perspectives”

The eruption of Mount Vesuvius on August 24th, 79 CE and the buried towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum powerfully stir the imagination of undergraduates, majors and non-majors. Students in general education courses whose eyes glaze over in a typical lecture about the Roman Empire become transfixed when shown pictures of the plaster casts from Pompeii or advertisements for local wine painted on a Herculanean wall. They begin to see the ancient world as a real place inhabited by real people. This paper will explore how the techniques of digital storytelling can help students think about the ancient world as an actual lived-in space, bringing students into more thoughtful engagement with the past.

I give each student, or group of students depending on enrollment, a character sketch based on inscriptions or graffiti found in Pompeii or Herculaneum. For example, “Gnaeus Alleius Nigidius, who owns property for rent in Pompeii, frets over what will happen to his shops and home as fires creep ever closer to Pompeii.” (based on CIL IV 138) Students must, then, think through what life would be like for their character based on the character’s occupation, social status, etc. Finally, students must craft a short (5-7 minute) narrative about the experience of their character during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. It is entirely up to the student whether the character survives or perishes, but I encourage them to think about how the social status of their character might impact the avenues open to them for escape.

Students are then ready to put their digital stories together. For the purposes of my course, I borrow Bernard Robin’s (2006) definition of digital storytelling as, “combining the art of telling stories with a variety of digital multimedia, such as images, audio, and video.” (709). Using freely downloadable programs (e.g., Audacity) and microphones that come built into laptops, iPhones, etc., students can easily record high quality audio of their narrative. Websites

such as freeplaymusic.com provide ready access to free music that can help enhance the emotional tone of the narrative. Students can search flickr.com for photos under the “Creative Commons” license in order to find copyright free images that reinforce key words from the narrative. When I have had the chance to take students to the Bay of Naples, I have also used a course folder as a repository for fellow classmates’ photos that could be used for these stories. Finally, students incorporate all of these materials together into a digital story using basic programs that come ready installed on many computers (e.g., iMovie or MovieMaker).

This assignment reminds students of the importance of stories, the heart of our field, by encouraging them to think about the tools that the contemporary world has available. Rather than only privileging the written word, this approach embraces new technologies to tell new stories about the past, a natural tendency for humans across the centuries. As Bryan Alexander (2011) suggests, “Indeed, no sooner do we invent a medium than do we try to tell stories with it.” (5) Through this assignment, students are put into the role of information producers rather than consumers. Because of the multimedia approach, students must think more intentionally about the underlying message of the story. Successful students will think not only about key word choices in the narrative of their story, but also about the way that music and images tell a story. The most thoughtful students will also have the chance to reflect on why certain images or sounds have the emotional draw that they do, perhaps even thinking about whether their ancient counterpart would be moved by similar sights and musical cues.

As students create their stories, they can also enhance their skills in visual literacy, an increasingly important skill for a generation of students who find themselves constantly bombarded by media messages, as Erin Riesland (2005) notes. They will have gained skills in carefully thinking about the way that images and music are used in the media to trigger certain

responses to the audio message that is being delivered. They will have thought about why certain kinds of images have the emotional resonance that they do. At the end of this digital story process, they will have formed a deeper connection to the Roman past and a better understanding of how stories are told in the contemporary world.

Bibliography

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