

DIGITAL STORYTELLING: Kizoa, Animoto, and Photo Story 3

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Educators know that students create better projects when they are personally invested in the material (Brookhart, Bronowicz 2003; McInerney 2008; Braxton 2008). The rewards are particularly significant when students can exercise some degree of creativity in the process of developing their projects (Su 2009). Possibly this is a result of engaging both hemispheres of the brain (Tatar 2009), or otherwise simply a reflection of the human preference to employ creativity in any endeavor, including "work" related ones.

One tried-and-true avenue for creative expression is through the use of stories or narratives. Simply including a narrative component may provide enough creative ammunition for students to feel that a particular assignment can be more interesting (Clark 2010), if their work is to be wrapped around a narrative format, such as a short story in favor of an essay or formal writing. But there are numerous free technology tools available today that take the process one step further, by injecting different editing options and high-end production values. Students do not merely assemble a story in words. They can now do it primarily with images, and many of the slideshow services online allow for text captions, dynamic transitions, special effects, and relevant animations. Students become videographers and directors as much as they function as storytellers. The slideshow builders thus do a better job than "old fashioned" essay/short story assignments at meeting the need of 21st century students, many of whom arrive at institutions of higher learning with at least an already-ingrained interest in such tools, if not explicit experience.

Kizoa (www.kizoa.com) offers a simple menu-driven, Flash-based interface for users to craft slideshows with uploaded images, added text, transitions, animations, special effects, and music selected from their limited online repository or uploaded in mp3 format. Users drag images and any desired effects onto a timeline at the bottom of the screen, in a workflow reminiscent of most software used to edit home movies. The service is free, but much of the content (transitions, effects) provided are classified as premium content; to actually use or share a slideshow using that content, the user would need to upgrade to a paid account. If the slideshow was built using only the free content (which is a more limited selection), the slideshow can be shared on Facebook, or a URL can be sent by email. Once on the webpage, a user will also find code for embedding the slideshow into a blog or webpage. The Flash-based product cannot be downloaded; it must be kept current at Kizoa and linked to for the intended audience to view.

Faculty and students will find greater control with Photo Story 3, a free program that can be downloaded from Microsoft (<http://www.microsoft.com/download/en/details.aspx?id=11132>). Once installed, it runs from the user's computer (rather than from a website). It is also menu-driven, and allows users to select photos and insert text and music. It lacks Kizoa's effects, but allows for customizing transitions. If users do not opt to customize transitions, the program will nonetheless choose interesting (and varied) transitions on its own, in contrast to Kizoa, which presented slides with no transitions.

Perhaps the best feature of Photo Story 3 is the ability for users to narrate audio with each slide, in addition to the music, which can be dialed back to the level of background music. Student digital projects can take on special resonance with the addition of audio, which both personalizes and humanizes the product. Fully online courses may benefit the most from the inclusion of such humanizing elements. The net effect of all these features in concert is one of convenience and customizability; Photo Story 3 is both easy to use and effective in constructing professional-looking slideshows.

For truly professional-looking videos, Animoto (www.animoto.com) offers advanced graphics that exceed either of the previous technologies. Like Kizoa, Animoto is cloud-based, offering users the ability to create online slideshows that can be linked by URL or embed, but it also allows for a low-resolution download in mp4 format. Animoto's main marketing message is its ease of use: users upload photos, add captions, select music, and the program will make its own decisions about effects and transitions. The resulting presentation has glossy, advanced graphics such as fluttering butterflies that look real. The free services, however, only allow for short clips (about twelve photos in total), and it lacks the ability to record voiceover audio as Photo Story 3 can do. Educators and students are encouraged to sign up for Animoto's free upgrade to the Pro plan (which requires an .edu email address for the automated process).

These interactive technologies are not only for students. Faculty may wish to explore creating their own digital slideshows and narratives as learning objects. Such artifacts may have varying degrees of utility, but at a minimum they inject digital classes, especially fully online courses, with interaction. Today's student prefers an environment richer than "simple text" (Huang 2010) and digital slideshows can be a part of every educator's arsenal of tools.

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