

# Telling & Sharing? Understanding Mobile Stories & the Future of Narratives.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the current characteristics of mobile storytelling based on the study of three different frameworks for mobile storytelling and 166 sample stories. It discusses the characteristics of mobile storytelling and presents a brief framework of analysis. It then for each of the cases presents an analysis of how users elaborate on a given theme, the use of editing, the application of narrative conventions and reader/viewer responses. It concludes that people partake of conventional storytelling techniques, when specifically asked to tell stories. People rarely use text and focus on “mundane” content, that is selected for sharing post-facto. There is very little dialogic interaction between storytellers and readers. However, in general providing concrete frameworks or motivations for storytelling seem to encourage storytelling practices.

## Keywords

Mobile media, storytelling, camera phones, mobility, narrative, moblogs, computer-mediated communication.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While I was writing this paper, one night a car crashed with full speed into a tree on the centre strip dividing the boulevard outside the building where I live. The next morning, I woke up to a vista of a car turned into a compressed metal sculpture, wrapped around the tree, and with the roof peeled off by the rescue team in order to save the driver (who survived). It is not a common sight where I live. And perhaps this is the reason why, for the two days the wreck was allowed to sit there, from my desk I could watch one person after the other step up to the car to look more closely at it. Several of these spectators pulled out their camera phone to take a picture, circling the wreck to get the best shot. Why? To preserve the potential morbidity of the scenery? To remind themselves of the frailty of life? To share the photo with non-present friends and with them ponder the story of what might have happened?

This event in its own way resonated with the underlying premise of this paper, echoed in the writings by several other theorists dealing with the phenomena of camera phones (see for instance [2],[10]). In the introduction to the book *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian*, Mitzuko Ito writes:

Internet studies have been tracing the increasing colonization by real-life identity and politics of the hitherto “free” domain of the Net; keitai [mobile phones] represent the opposite motion of the virtual

colonizing more and more settings of everyday life. ([7], p. 8).

This paper examines one aspect of the “colonizing” of the everyday: how people through mobile devices can tell and *share stories* about everyday life. The increasing pervasiveness of mobile phones with cameras have enhanced the opportunities that the small digital cameras brought about: to carry a camera everywhere and to take all the photos we want with no added cost. With the mobile phone we furthermore have the possibility of adding a title or text to the photo (or video) and then to transmit or upload our “message”, our story, to the internet. The internet is in itself a photo album with infinite storage space which provides an audience of both friends and complete strangers who might be willing to look at, comment on, perhaps even rate our material or link to it. Today, it is possible for everybody with a mobile phone and internet access to tell and share stories of everyday life experiences with each other. But what happens when technology in this way invades the realm of the everyday, when we are constantly in the process of transforming the lived moment into *a mediated and shared experience*? Which stories (apart from those about car wrecks) do we tell? And how do we tell them, if “telling” is present at all? How does the framing of the storytelling, the design of the websites to which we upload our experiences, frame and thereby influence our storytelling? In order to answer some of these questions, this paper analyses, primarily within a Danish context, some existing frameworks for mobile storytelling offered with the www as the publishing outlet; and the way that these frameworks have been designed and used.

The point of departure will be three cases which present different frameworks for mobile storytelling and which each in their way explicit ask of their users to *tell stories* about their experiences: the photo sharing website [www.23hq.com](http://www.23hq.com), the campaign website [www.getmoving.dk](http://www.getmoving.dk) and the event-based website [www.mobilmarathon.dk](http://www.mobilmarathon.dk), related to the Roskilde music festival. These frameworks for storytelling have also been chosen because they offer varying degrees of freedom in choice of subject and structure of the stories; and in terms of the possibilities of interaction with site users. The effect of these varying degrees of authorial freedom and user interaction will be compared and discussed in the final part of the paper.

Finally, this paper discusses how this form of mobile storytelling situates itself within the tradition of interactive storytelling. Generally, mobile stories have attracted quite a lot of media attention in recent years under the heading of

“user-generated content” and as examples of “citizen journalism”. However, as academics we have not granted them much interest as a potential new subgenre of interactive narrative. Perhaps now, it is time to consider how the concepts of “interactive”, “storytelling” and “narrative” are evolving in a decade during which mobile devices are bound to become one of the predominant media forms through which we engage with, and reflect on, our experience of being in the world. Stories uploaded to the internet by users of mobile phones and digital cameras are not only highly interesting and current examples of user-generated content; they are indicative of one direction “interactive storytelling” might be taking in the near future.

## 2. MOBILE STORYTELLING

### 2.1 What is a mobile story?

The stories discussed in this paper are based on personal experiences as they have been captured on camera or video. Thus, even if the stories told are fictitious, they reflect or improvise on lived personal experience and are not imagined or staged by professional storytellers. Thus, as already indicated, this paper employs a rather broad perspective on what a story is and what storytelling consists of. In this context, I simply understand “storytelling” (synonymous with “narration”) as the structured and mediated presentation of experience(s) with an recognisable beginning and end. That is, experiences that under the generic heading of “story” (applied by either a site host or a user) have been given a form and structure and thus, through the presentation and choice of sequence, seek to communicate a specific “meaning” or point, even if it be only in terms of selection of material.

From a theoretical point of view, “narrative” is a specific way of structuring content, through which meaning emerges from the “double temporality” of narrative as genre, [3, p. 9]: the interplay between the presentation of events (the discourse) and the underlying story. The story itself has typically been considered as media independent (see for instance [1] and [13]), while form (discourse) is considered as media dependant. The story of Hamlet can thus be *presented* as a play, a film or a comic strip, but in principle the story remains the same. The point of departure in this paper is that shared mobile content presented within a framework which explicitly calls for “stories” are indeed *structured presentations* of experience which seek to convey a sense of temporality and meaning, and as such can consider themselves as belonging to the communicative genre of stories or narratives. As an example, an entire photo album on the photo sharing site Flickr is not considered a story “or storytelling”; but a Flickr group with the title “Tell a story in 5 frames” or “Story Time” containing photos with or without supplemental text – would be approached as such. - However, the paper will also argue that form and content cannot necessarily be easily separated. As we will see, the mobile device as medium and the act of sharing also seem to determine *what* kind of stories are being told.

Furthermore, in this context a distinction is made between story material meant to be viewed on a mobile phone, and material produced *with* a mobile phone and/or digital camera. This paper only examines the latter form of stories, because

stories produced *for* the mobile phone might not be produced *by* a mobile device in the first place. Furthermore, material produced for the mobile phone has to adhere to specific design conventions pertaining to the mobile phone and the viewing situation; i.e. size and type of the interface, bandwidth, picture resolution, length of story etc; elements the discussion of which lies outside the scope of the current study. Hence, stories submitted to sites such as the Canadian mobfest ([www.mobfest.ca](http://www.mobfest.ca)) or the Danish lommemfilm.dk (“pocketfilm.dk”) site ([www.lommemfilm.dk](http://www.lommemfilm.dk)) belong to the latter category and have therefore not been included in this study.

To conclude, mobile storytelling is defined as the structured and shared presentation of visual material produced with a mobile device, supplemented by text and/or music and sound. This does not imply that this is per se the way stories should be told with mobile devices, it merely reflects the current “state of the art” of mobile storytelling, one can observe. For instance, much of the existing research literature on storytelling and use of mobile devices discuss uses of photos and systems which support visual storytelling with still photos (see for instance [2], [10], and [16]). However, the constant improvement of digital cameras and mobile device technologies have lead to an increase in the number of people who now not only use their mobile devices to take pictures but also use them to make small video recordings. The booming popularity of YouTube and video podcasts demonstrates that we might be approaching a second era of “home videos”; there is at least reason to believe that “mobile stories” will increasingly be told with moving images. For this study, the video based [getmoving.dk](http://getmoving.dk) site has been chosen as case to exemplify the design of a framework for this kind of mobile storytelling format.

### 2.2 The content and motivation for mobile storytelling

Many of the early writings on mobile devices and mobile phones as a communicative medium emphasise that not only do mobile devices function as personal communication tools (“a phone”) but they allow people to tend to and groom their social network, through the use of sms’ing (“texting”) and exchange of photos (for a seminal early study on mobile communication as gift-giving, see for instance [14]). Mobile communication is not just one-on-one communication but also group communication, in Roman Jacobson’s terminology “phatic communication”, that merely by virtue of being communication confirms social ties. However, as Garcia-Montes et al argues, our need to communicate with others through our phone might also be the expression of a growing need for “social saturation”, that our mobile existence with its decoupling from central institutions (such as parents or workplace) produces [5]. The possibility of being “always available” that the mobile technology has created, means that we are increasingly getting used to tell and share with people in our network that which we are doing “right now”, almost the moment we are doing it. Apart from texting, another way of providing others with this information is the sharing of photos and mobile phone videos. Early European studies of uses of camera phones (reported in Kindberg et al in their article “How and Why People use Camera Phones” [10] showed

that people sent images “to increase or maintain group cohesion, express affection, support conversation, and tell stories”. They note that 2/3 of the batch of camera photos they looked at (303 by 34 subjects) were eventually shared, in most cases (75%) by simply showing them on the phone to others and concluded that the subjects in their study did use the camera phone “very much as a way of enhancing social interaction” ([10], p.11). Thus, the act of sharing seem to be an important part of the uses of mobile media (see also [18]).

On parallel lines, researchers who have looked specifically at the use of camera phones emphasise that the fact that the camera is always at hand has changed *what* we choose to record and share with others. In his article on photobloggers Kris Cohen notes:

Photobloggers like, most of all, to make photographs of what they call ‘the everyday’, the ‘banal’ or the ‘mundane’. These descriptors are a way of emphasizing what their photographs are not about: they are not your conventional holiday or Big Occasion snaps, not just about weddings and birthdays. They’re not that kind of mundane. Instead, most photobloggers say that ‘real life’ is the desired content of their photographs. They want pictures of life as it happens, as they experience it. ([4], p.887)

Other studies of the motives of the mobile camera users support this observation. Already in 2003, Ito and Okabe in an article on the use of camera phones in Japan comments that,

In a survey by IPSE Marketing conducted in December last year, 42.4 percent of camera phone users reported that they took photos of “things that they happened upon that were interesting.” This was followed by family members (39.5 percent), friends (36.6 percent), self (26.4 percent), pets (23.7 percent) and travel photos (21.5 percent). The contrast between the serendipitous and everyday categories leading the pack and the trailing “travel photo” category is a striking testament to the everyday and ubiquitous uses of the camera phone. [12, web]

Hence, what we record and share with our camera phones seem to be what I would coin “small stories” about everyday life. This is also confirmed by Van House et al, who in a study of the use of a camera phone system, similar to Otabe and Ito, observe that camera phone users use their cameras to capture “frequent, mundane images of their daily lives”, pointing out that, in contrast to earlier studies (like their own [12]), this use is “quite different from most personal photographic practice which tends to focus on the exceptional, not the mundane” ([14], p. 2).

Kindberg et al observed that the dominant subjects of photos were people (51%), friends and camera holders themselves included. 32% were of specific objects, and apart from these subjects, photographic subjects included outdoor or indoor scenery, pets and writing/other images. Next to serving as memory aid (such as pictures of desired objects), people also took pictures as evidence (cf. a dent in a car) or as part of a special message (sending a picture of a rose to someone ill). They therefore concluded that photos served both social and individual uses, and in both cases could support both an affective and functional purpose, however the affective uses

notably appeared to be the most important. An important point in their study in the context of this paper is, that not only do camera phones (always at hand cameras) make us photograph other things, the mobile phone has also afforded innovative uses of the combination of instant photography and instant sharing, such as creating a mutual experience or sharing special moments with absent friends and family. They note that

“in addition to sharing in the moment, many images in this category [pictures for absent friend and family] were shared after the fact either on the phone itself (38%) or sent later (16%). Most were sent directly from the phone, but a few were sent by email on a PC, via a web page or as a print-out in a later. This post-hoc sharing typically involved story-telling after the fact with friends and family who had been absent. “ ([10]. p 8)

In general, these studies seem to point to the fact that sharing and telling have always been important in our uses of photos, but that the always at hand property of mobile camera devices has created new reasons for sharing the material we have produced., The mobile device has in itself changed the stories (or photographic subjects) we want to share, shifting the focus from the extraordinary to the more ordinary aspects and objects of everyday life. The moment of sharing may vary: sometimes we publish (share) first and edit our stories late. Sometimes we edit first, and share later.

Perhaps the existence of mobile cameras has not only furthered the development of new tools for sharing and organising the many photos (and increasingly videos) we shoot of our everyday life, but it has created a need for outlets where the “telling” which the camera phones allow can easily take place and where both storage and publication of our abundant material is instantly possible. Organising the many photos/recordings in a “storylike” manner might simply be one of the best ways to structure and present all the data we produce, as Balabanovic et al observe ([1], p. 565). At the same time, these services can be the factor that *motivates* our photo taking. Cohen puts it poignantly in his article on photobloggers: the photoblog is what provides the photobloggers’ motivation for taking photos [2]. “Telling” can simply be an excuse for the act of sharing.

Van House et al in their study of uses of photos, as previously mentioned, points out that personal photos are in fact used as an occasion for a storytelling which fulfill several purposes:

The narrative use of photos among our participants serves to structure and transmit personal, interpersonal, and especially intergenerational memory, to replay, share, and deepen social experience and relationship, to express personal and group identity, relies on the materiality of the photographic artifact as a condensation and elicitor of story, and functions through, and enables to function, intimate oral discourse. [15, p.9]

Mobile photos are increasingly being used to share moments of our everyday life. What we need to understand in more detail at this point in time, is how the frameworks of sharing on a concrete level inspire the act of telling, and how other

users/ readers/viewers of these stories might play an increasing prominent part in the choice and afterlife of the stories.

### 2.3 Mobile stories and interactivity

With the advent of digital media, as users of stories and narrative games we have come to expect that we can affect the presentation of stories or at least the pathway through it. Storytelling might not be dependant on an author at all, but can unfold as the interaction between a system (a world) and us, as is the case with the genre of “interactive fictions” or gameworlds. If we consider mobile storytelling from the vantage point of the critical theorists who hailed the democratisation of the construction of stories in the early days of digital literature, mobile storytelling could in fact be deemed “old-fashioned” and authoritative, because the mobile storyteller function as a traditional author, at least in the first stages of storytelling. This author autonomously records, selects, uploads and presents material, which site visitors then look at. This has the consequence than when we discuss the “users” of mobile stories, it might actually make more sense to apply the old notions of “readers” or “viewers”, because their consumption of the mobile stories are typically very passive. When for instance we visit a photo sharing website, we can choose which stories to visit when, and we can comment on them, but we can rarely *do* anything with them, unless we choose to “borrow” some of the photos to make stories of our own (in which case we are no longer interacting with the original story, but *remediating* its material for our own purposes<sup>1</sup>). However, the fact that mobile photos and mobile videos are shared more and more easily, means that the life of a story can be decided by readers/viewers/users; its exposure to other readers can be determined by factors such as rating, linking, recommendations, the wish to “own” the story as a piece of cultural capital and so forth – and critical comments could in principle make the author remove some material, restructure or retell the story. Therefore it might be a useful exercise to rethink our notion of what “interactivity” with a story can be. The structural interaction with early digital stories is here replaced by a post-facto social interaction *around* and *about* the mobile stories; interactivity is no longer structural or formative, but *social*. In its most productive form, the interaction with a story might be another story, a *dialogue* of stories: as is the case with the video responses one may find on sites such as YouTube.

### 2.4 Who tells mobile stories?

Even though the pervasiveness of mobile phones has meant that storytelling no longer belongs within the realm of digital artists and techheads, one might ask, if mobile storytelling is still a phenomenon only for the select few? This does no longer appear to be the case. A study of the European Mobile Service Consumers conducted by Jupiter Research in September 2005 [8], and involving 3.532 users from UK,

France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden, indicated that next to simply using the mobile phone as a phone, “texting” is still by far the most used mobile service. However, taking pictures (28% of the users, 71% of the 3G users) and MMS’ing (28% of users, 71% of 3G users) are the second and third most used service. Thus there is reason to believe, that providing services (including storytelling services) that require users to submit pictures or videos in principle are currently likely to attract submissions from almost \_ of the consumer base, at least in Europe.

It should be noted, that the Jupiter survey report points out (concurrent with similar observations in other surveys) that the price of the service is pivotal, as a majority of consumers with 2G/2.5G phones (57% in average) are not willing to pay for multimedia services. Nevertheless, the survey showed that a lot of people do in fact already use their mobile phone to take pictures and to send them; and it also shows that within the younger generations, “mobile aficionados” (a term used in the survey to describe consumers which use a multiplicity of services and are willing to pay for them) are much more widespread, as they make up 27% of the age group from 15-24 and 15% of the age group ranging from 25 to 34 years.

At the time of writing, data sets more recent than those from 2004 about general European use of mobile phones is not available. However, the numbers from 2004 reveal that the number of mobile subscriptions is up to 100% in almost all European countries, in some countries even more than 100% (with one person having more than one subscription, [6]). More recent (2006) local numbers from Denmark reveal that 95% of the Danes have access to mobile technologies and 61% of Danish families own a digital camera while more than 90% have access to the internet ([5]). Moreover, the number of MMS’s sent have exploded from 2003 to 2006. In the first part of 2003 “only” 498.000 MMS’s were sent in Denmark. In the last part of 2006 the number was almost 13 million. It thus seems safe to assume that all Danes have access to a mobile phone and that many Danes now use MMS services occasionally (the Danish population currently totals 5.4 mill. people). Services or competitions who ask of the Danes (and many Europeans) to submit mobile phone material to for instance a website (such as the three sites studied in this paper) should in principle therefore target a huge part of the Danish population.

## 3. ANALYSING MOBILE STORIES

What should we look for when we study mobile stories? An essential component in understanding how they work must be an analysis of the relationship between the storytelling framework provided by, in this case, a web service and the stories which this framework inspires mobile users to tell. As we have seen, content focus, presentation format and interactivity options are important aspects to consider. Therefore an analysis should include a study of the following areas:

**The time of sharing:** at which point do storytellers appear to submit stories to the website – instantly or after the fact?

**The structuring of content:** how do the storytellers respond to and work with themes and rules imposed on them? Do they draw on narrative conventions from other media forms in their presentation? To which degree are the experiences related

<sup>1</sup> As a thought experiment (no such thing to my knowledge currently exist), one could imagine a serial mobile narrative (consisting of several uploads), whose content could be changed according to user comments on previous installments. Social interaction might thus in the future determine also the content of the stories more directly

mediated? Do they appear to be carefully selected? Are they edited? Have they been modified in any way?

**Story themes and topics:** Is everyday life at the center of the stories, or is it in fact more unusual stories that are shared with the distant audience of the web? Which aspects of everyday life are presented, demonstrated through the choice of for instance titles and text or other forms of expressions (sound, voice-over etc)? Are stories clearly staged or fictionalised or are they unedited recordings of real events?

**The social life of the story told:** Can a story be rated? Is it rated? Can readers/viewers comment on the story? What are the nature of these comments? (for instance affirmative, critical, direction-giving, experience-sharing?) Can authors respond to the comments? Do they respond?

These aspects will all be studied in more detail in the following analysis of the three select cases. Based on interviews with the site producers and own studies of the available material online, for each case, the storytelling framework will be presented, and the type of stories told analysed, and it will be explored how users have elaborated on the given themes and worked with narrative conventions, and how reader/viewers have responded to the stories, if possible.

## 4. GETMOVING.DK – YOUTH TELLING MOBILE STORIES

The “getmoving.dk” website [[www.getmoving.dk](http://www.getmoving.dk)] was launched as part of a recurrent annual campaign by the Danish National Board of Health. The campaign aims at making the Danish population aware of the fact that they need to exercise everyday. The “60 minutes a day” campaign launched in 2005, specifically targeted children and young people. In 2006, the media company La Familia helped design the campaign, and, inspired by the growing popularity of YouTube, the getmoving.dk site became a central element in their attempt to consciously address a younger audience.

On the getmoving website, children and young people between 10 and 18 could submit small video clips, maximum 20 seconds long, telling a small story about how they get their daily exercise. The submitted “films” were following presented in a viewing window, with the title and name of the submitter in a text field to the left. Visitors to the site could rate the films from 0-6 stars, but could not comment on them. The winner were chosen by a jury and the National Health Board. The winner’s film would be shown on national TV and in addition smaller prizes would befall a number of runners-up. To create attention around the site, La Familia also used a viral product to inspire people to submit their own stories: a self-produced video launched on a number of seeding sites. Online advertising was at a later point supplemented with promotion of the website in offline media (posters, TV spots etc). All efforts were concentrated on a select week in September 2006, at the end of which the winner of the competition was announced.

The competition resulted in around 200 submissions, of which 189 stayed onsite. A small number of submissions were withdrawn from the site by the producers, because the content was too explicitly violent or sexual, but none were withdrawn because they fell outside the theme. Looking at how the films were shot and how many youngsters appeared in front of the camera, the producers estimate that as many as 1200 people

might have been involved in the production of the films. Like in the production of “real” movies, a mobile “film” might also involve several crew members, both in front of and behind the camera, even though several of the clips submitted to the site reveal that it need not always be so; many of the young participants simply placed the mobile camera on a desk and filmed themselves.

### 4.1.1 Viewer activity

In terms of exposure, the La Familia representative Casper Villier which I interviewed estimates that the website had around 20.000 unique visitors, who all came back at least twice and saw in average around 10 movies each during the two visits. Villier believes that most of, if not all, of the 189 clips were rated by visitors to the site, which seem to concur with my observations. Thus, even if it is it is not possible to learn much about the social interaction around the small films though due to the lack of comments, it appears that there were a lot of viewer activity on the website and that users embraced the rating options.

Based on the numbers quoted above, the company considers the getmoving.dk campaign a success; however the degree to which the success is also dependant on the general heavy marketing of the site is not immediately transparent. As part of this study, all of the stories have been perused, but only the 50 most viewed stories and the 18 price nominated movies have been analysed in depth, all together 56 video clips. I estimated, that these would also be the films that site visitors found most interesting or were exposed to during a visit to the site.

### 4.2 Elaboration on the theme

A visitor to the site today (March 2007) will be able to examine the clips uploaded to the site through various entry ways made available after the competition ended (most recent, most viewed, best rated, nominees etc). Submitters could apparently not tag their own content in any way.

One way to engage with the film clips is to explore the categories that the site managers have divided the clips into (some clips are listed within several categories). Since my own initial categorisation followed the producers closely, for this study I decided to use their categorisation. Thus, the stories on “how I get my daily exercise” have been sorted into the following sub-themes and the number in parentheses indicate my count of the number of films which have been “tagged” as belonging to this sub-theme by the site editor: Jumping (97), Sports (swimming, boxing, horse riding – 58), freestyle (49), dancing (47), running (46), salto (this category includes many of the “urban tricking” clips, 32), rolling (25), soccer (21), “fun” (21), trampoline (21), gymnastics (20), kickboxing (15), exercising (12) and swirling/turning (11).

The huge popularity of the theme “jumping” may be contributed to the influence of current exercise trends amongst Danish children and youth: in the summers of 2005 and 2006, trampolines were much in fashion, available in many stores and suddenly a household item in many a Danish home. The international phenomena of “urban tricking” and “parcours” throughout 2006 gained a certain momentum in Denmark, and also attracted general media attention. The popularity of these themes might thus mimic what is currently being considered “cool” sports to do. However, some clips simply show children

(mainly) girls jumping in beds or “jumping around” to music testify, that many of the submitters seem to have chosen to simply portray the form of exercise they normally engage in or consider somewhat goofy - and thus entertaining. Notably, seven of the 20 clips nominated by the jury are about urban tricking in some form, with titles like “Get moving with KJ” or “Streetmovement for life”, which indicates that stories were ultimately chosen by the jury also because of their “coolness” factor.

In general, the titles chosen for the clips are quite revealing in that many just describe, and in this way frame, the form of exercise depicted in the clip (“Breakdance”, “Rappeling”, and “Skateboarding”) or convey the author’s perspective on his subject: “Soccer is cool”, “Running on a field is healthy”; “A happy dance”.

At a first glance, it thus seem that in terms of story content, most clips adhere to the general theme and function as demonstrations of a specific form of exercise or movement.

### 4.3 Editing & multimodal content

However, a closer look at the 56 films analysed reveals that many of the young authors have tried to edit their films in various ways. More than half of the films (31) have been edited, whereas the remaining 25 films have been “shot” in one take by a person holding the camera pretty much in the same position; or by a camera placed on desk. Editing, when it occurs, either takes the form of evident “post-production” editing which includes superimposing text on the images typically in the beginning or the end of the films (announcing the title of the film, “the director” and perhaps the “message”); imposed gimmicks like moving images in a photo album, black-or-white photos; an opening shot of a newspaper; or a transition feature such as a fuzzy picture in the beginning of a new scene. The more primitive form of editing seems to consist in the camera phone holder just stopping and starting the camera when appropriate.

26 of the films studied contain a soundtrack, often upbeat pop or techno music. Some of the films shot on the spot in one shot also include music as part of the background setting, typically a radio that seems to have been switched on consciously in order to provide a “dogme-style” soundtrack. Other of the unedited clips nevertheless including some movement of the camera: the camera holder walks closer to the subject or “circles” it to show what is happening.

Overall, it hence appears that a majority of the young producers have been inspired by traditional moviemaking and multimodal forms of expression (and/or the editing tools available on their camera phone or computer) and have tried to manipulate their films in order to make them convey the message more clearly. If one cannot identify narrative arcs in these very short clips, one can definitely identify the process of “telling”, the structuring and editing of material in order to control presentation and the construction of meaning.

### 4.4 Narrative conventions

In the interview, Casper Villier revealed that the campaign producers had initially considered making the getmoving competition into a strict “make a commercial film” competition. However, they decided on letting it be a question of choice with the submitters what form of story they wanted

to tell. The result is highly interesting: several of the filmmakers are clearly inspired, also by virtue of the short time frame, by commercial film conventions, such as using a final text or a “voice-over” that explicitly instructs the audience to exercise. Other clips employ a funny punch line, such as one clip in which we see a teenage boy from the back making pumping movements with his hands – the viewer is “tricked” into believing he might be masturbating, but then the camera moves up to the boy and moves in front of him and we discover that he is using his football pump, and then he gets up and walk of the room with the pump under his arm.

However, other of the young filmmakers with their works place themselves in the non-pretentious “home video” tradition, submitting a low quality film of “I just happen to have a camera around” (another likely reason for the low quality admittedly being their lack of technical skills which would allow them to edit the film). The fact that all films adhere to the general theme and the generally imposed limit of max 2MB size and 20 seconds of length and yet all in their own way tells a little story about “how I or we get our daily exercise” indicate that providing a framework which ask participants to answer a basic question, results in films which openly and clearly gives – or rather *tells – a response –* to this question in case.

### 4.5 The winners

Finally, the 18 clips nominated for a price deserve a few extra comments. They distinguish themselves from the other clips by being presented as recognisable stories; by being more elaborately edited works; or quite unorthodox responses to the theme. One of the clips is titled “alternative (clothes) drying” and depicts three boys “air drying” laundry by dancing around in the garden; another is titled “This is how we get to school” and tells a little story of a group of kids missing the school bus and then running after it. Another clip titled “Exercise is like a journey” is edited in a very advanced graphical style: a number of very short clips play inside a picture frame in a photo album. A few of the films serve as show-offs; such as the “badminton showboat” where a badminton player performs amazing tricks with his racket; or the previously mentioned “Streetmovement for life” which shows some rather advanced parcours tricks in a fast paced editing style. It thus appears that in the getmoving.dk case successful mobile “storytelling” is deemed successful for the same reasons that film or commercials in other contexts stand out as “good stories”.

## 5. THE 2006 MOBILE MARATHON – EVENT-BASED STORYTELLING

The second case of stories told by mobile phone users are the stories submitted to the [www.mobilemaraton.dk](http://www.mobilemaraton.dk) website. This website was created in 2006 in connection with that year’s “Roskilde Festival”, a festival which attracts young people from all over Europe, because of the number of international pop, rock and electronica bands who play at the Festival. Similar to the Getmoving project, The Mobile Marathon was launched as a competition: competitors were asked to tell stories about their Roskilde festival experiences by uploading a minimum of five photos from their mobile phones to the website during the festival. On the website, they could create a

personal profile and through that profile tell as many stories as they wanted. The 23hq photo-sharing website software served as the technical backbone. Submitters could either supplement their photos with text when uploading their pictures or by logging on to the website afterwards. Visitors to the site could rate and comment on each story. Motivations for submitting the stories were also given: The three best stories would be awarded a prize (prize no1 consisted of 2 tickets to next year's festival, second prize was a mobile phone, third prize as USB stick) and good stories might also be featured in the official Festival Newspaper "Festival Globe". The competition was primarily advertised at the Roskilde Festival by four representatives who mixed with the festival crowd and announced it. It also got some press before the event.

FLOC, a small Danish company that develops innovative mobile services, produced the site and hosted the competition, supported by 23hq, The Roskilde Festival Organisation and the "Festival Globe". In interview, FLOC director Kasper Kofod related that the main reason for launching this competition was an interest in exploring whether this kind of competitive format would work in conjunction with an event like the Roskilde Festival. As such it was not planned to be a major commercial event, but rather served as form of test bed.

At deadline, 46 stories had been submitted to the website, by 33 "authors" (one author submitted 9 stories). Three stories were awarded prizes, told by users "Tinzes" (1. price), "Mariemedroeven" (2. price) and "Pallekristensen" (3. price).

Prior to the Mobile Marathon event Kasper Kofod had been involved in running a mobile concept development project at the IT University in Copenhagen that this author also took part in. Several of the IT University and Danish School of Design students who had been involved in this project subsequently participated as volunteers in the Mobile Marathon event and many of them chose to use the storytelling system themselves. Therefore several of the users who submitted stories are known to me, as either students or people involved with the FLOC company. If some of them appear consistently on photos in a story I have listed this story as told by one in the volunteer group. Following, out of 33 authors, only around 19 have not been professionally involved in the project. The three winners belong amongst these 19.

### 5.1 Elaborations on the theme

The Roskilde Festival is known to be a small "world in the world", where people are very relaxed and everything can happen. People often go there with their friends, and divide their time between going to concerts or eating, drinking and hanging out, either on the festival site, or in their "tent groups" at the huge camping area of the festival site. Many people return to the festival year after year and some tent groups through the years establish their own fame, for instance by having special flags or banners that announce the location and identity of the group, or by hosting fun parties or other crazy activities. So "hanging out" at the tent area, next to partying with your own group, includes cruising round to discover the "cool" tent groups, spotting potential fun places to join. It is interesting to observe that though obviously several concert photos appear in the submitted stories, many of the stories in a very haphazard way (which makes it difficult to identify any emergent sub-themes) document this tent camp

life and the more mundane aspect of the Roskilde experience, such as pictures of various camp activities, apparent self-portraits in various stages of drunkenness, or portraits of friends, and "noticeable" people the photographers have spotted, with funny hairdos, clothes or very little clothes etc. Photos also repeatedly include images of garbage (usually an issue at festivals of this size) and toilets, "fun signs", food and beverages.

### 5.2 Editing and multimodal content

Looking at the stories, most stories are told through photos only and it is very difficult to judge whether stories have in fact been taken with camera phones on the spot or if they have been taken with digital cameras and uploaded after the fact (even if the competition announcement called for mobile phone content). The quality of pictures varies a lot, some are clearly taken with cameras with a high resolution, others look like photos taken with low resolution (1.3 MB) camera phones.

Very few authors have (subsequently?) added text to the stories, and several simply seem to have used the mobile marathon website as a chaotically organised photo album. Nobody seems to have uploaded video clips (it is possible, but the competition description explicitly called for photos). One "story" for instance contains more than 100 photos. The eight stories that use text, are decidedly also the most "storylike" as the text is clearly used to lend narrative causality and a sense of temporality to the story. This is the case in one of the winning stories, which uses what looks like randomly taken festival pictures, to tell a story of a hunt for a guy who stole several crates of empty but refundable (and thus valuable) beer bottles: here the text tells us how to interpret the pictures and impose a fictional sequentiality to the depicted events or objects. The text for this image of sore festival feet (image 1) for instance says: "The "executor" [nickname for the perpetrator] uses his feet as a fear-inspiring biological weapon!"



Image 1. One of the photos in one of the winning stories.

### 5.3 Narrative conventions

Most of the stories employ the standard title "Mobile Marathon 2006", and if they change the title it is typically to indicate some form of temporality: such as in the titles "Monday" or "Marathon Man – A day in the festival life". What is "told" in the many of the stories therefore seem to be small stories of events or people that the photographer has come across or spotted during a single day in the festival, while storytellers seem to recognise the narrative advantage

that placing these experiences within some form of temporal framing provides. Some of the “stories”, though having no apparent narrative cohesion, nevertheless clearly signal an ending by using a photo of people on the way home from the festival as the last one in the series. Four stories contain no pictures from the Roskilde Festival at all, however two of these appear to be test stories submitted by the producers. But the rest of the stories do stick faithfully to the subject of “The Roskilde Festival 2006”.

## 5.4 Reader participation

Only a few of the stories have been rated (the maximum number of original ratings is around 9), and similarly very few attracted comments – mostly 1-3 comments.<sup>2</sup> None of the authors have themselves responded to the comments. This might be due to the fact that the reading and rating of the stories require that people go to the website, read the stories and discover the rating system at the bottom of the page. However, readers are not likely to do this at the festival (where there are only a few internet cafes available and people are busy having fun) and post-festival only people who happened to know about the competition would likely have found their way to the site. The few comments made are interesting, as one reader for instance points out in a comment that “these photos are not from 2006” (the photos in question were all taken on a rainy day, and in 2006 the sun shone for most of the festival). This use of the comment function could be interpreted as an attempt to tell and warn the jury that the storyteller in question could be considered as “cheating” by not using “authentic” photos. Most of the other comments are affirmative, commenting on the quality of the story.

## 5.5 The Winners

An analysis of the 46 submitted stories clearly reveals that the three winners of the “mobile marathon” are the stories that have received most attention by their owners. The first prize was awarded to the story with the title “Mobile Marathon 2006 – a Day at the Roskilde Festival “ about all the things one has to do during an ordinary day at the festival; the second prize was given to the story “Mobile Marathon 2006” about a fashion show that the storyteller helped organised. This story is also noticeable because the storyteller have chosen a special big font for the text and thus put much care into the visual presentation of the complete story. The third prize was given to the above mentioned story about the bottle crate theft, titled “Pant theft – the executor must be caught”. All these stories employ text and all of them have been rated and got at least one positive comment. It thus appears that readers’ responses to the stories have been taken into account by the jury.

## 6. 23HQ’s STORIES – NARRATIVE FRAMING OF PHOTOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE

The Danish owned [www.23hq.com](http://www.23hq.com) website, whose software served as a backbone for the mobile marathon site, offers its international users a free personal profile with the possibility to upload their photos to a photo sharing album, complete

<sup>2</sup> The evaluation of rating and comments has unfortunately been severely compromised by the number of spam comments and ratings added to the site since the competition ended.

with comment functions, the possibility of composing sets (“albums”), tagging photos and joining groups, very much like the very popular Flickr site. However, 23 in addition offers functions such as a calendar and the function “Stories” which is visible as a menu tab on the profile page. The Stories function at 23 is interesting because it provides users with a continuous possibility to use their digital photos for making stories. As such, it is distinctly different from the two other storytelling frameworks, who only existed for a limited amount of time. In an email-interview, site co-owner, Thomas Mygdal-Madsen points out that they added this functionality because they “believe in the narrative as a means of communication”. However, according to him, as of March 2007 only 5-10% of the users use the function and they typically tell 1-2 stories only. Around 50% of the photos uploaded to the site are around 1MB in size, which Mygdal-Madsen believes is a good indicator of the number of mobile phone camera contributions to the site.

In practice, the “Stories” provides the storyteller with a clear-cut narrative frame within which to organise his or her photos. Thus, after having uploaded or selected photos in the profile photo album, the user is asked to provide the story with a title, and in addition there is an empty textbox above the photos which appears with the info text “Click here to write a beginning of your story”, an empty text box next to all the submitted photos which appears with the info text “click here to add text to your story” and an empty text box after the photos with the info text “click here to write the ending of your story”.

Judging from my observations, despite the general low percentage of users of the function, it does however seem to be gaining some momentum (this might however also be due to a general growth in user numbers). When first I started looking at the site in august 2006, I could only find 21 stories posted under the “Stories” function. In March 2007 when this study was completed, around 100 stories were available. Out of these, 36 were obviously just tests consisting of one or a few photos and/or some gibberish text. Of these 100 stories, I have thus looked more closely at 64 stories, which consist of one or more photo and appear to seriously try to explore the function. To get an overview, I categorised each story within just one theme, though many overlap.

### 6.1 Elaboration on the theme

The 64 “storytellers” seem to interpret the notion of “Stories” very differently. The most elaborate story consists of 31 photos. Most stories, however, consists of 2-6 photos. A majority tell stories about travel experiences and expeditions (19 stories). There is a small section of “stories” about or on culture (15), for instance a small series of four stories about Chinese calligraphy or the story about the King of Thailand by a Thai user, which consists of only one photo and the following text:

This is a picture of Nai Luang, or the King of Thailand, and an old woman who was waiting to see him.

This pic is really touchy for me.

[...]

He never abandon his people, and that's why we will never abandon him.

And that's why we call him " Father " ,,and that's why we love the king...

[...]

[<http://www.23hq.com/daonie/story/777016>]

This is a good example of how some storytellers seem to use the Stories function to tell other users about their country and culture or of the study of another culture. Other examples within this category is a small story about the building that hosted the first German miner's union or a story that comments on the use of graphics on Indian clothing.

A small number of stories (6) are highly interesting examples of "artistic" ways to actually tell more abstract stories *with* photos. One story by the user "tensoriana" shows different photos of couples in different settings and comments on the relation between words and text. Another story by "breitenberg" (author of two artistic stories) ruminates on the experience of looking at a door. A few other stories (3) seem to be work or school related: one consists of photos of a library and another of photos from a conference. The third is remarkable because the story is about how the storyteller's school have forbidden pupils to use social software sites. The storyteller has taken screenshots of the named websites at school, which he posts with the story about the ban in order to tell the world how stupid the teachers are.

The remainder of the stories are stories about a particular photo ("one photo stories", 3); stories about an event or an activity (4, such as a sports teams victory); objects of desire (3, such as a motorbike or anime figures); small stories about a pet or animals/nature (4); stories that could be considered part of a life story (2); and stories that could be considered as jokes (2) and one is of a newborn baby (1). Finally, there is a "story" that is a guide to the storytelling function and another "story" that is simply an elaborated profile description.

Most of the stories simply employ generic titles like "My story", "story" or "story test" (49). The rest of the stories have their own title. Titles range from more abstract titles like "Found Language" or "The Sad Canal" to straightforward titles like "Iain Lou – Thailand Laos (July/Aug 2006)". The intention of titles in general seem to be to orient the reader/viewer by telling them what they are looking at or how they should interpret the photos that follow.

## 6.2 Editing and multimodal content

The system in itself, as described above, by its set-up calls for editing and reflection on the photos and text chosen for the stories. The idea seem to be that users should use photos already uploaded for their stories. It is possible to upload photos directly to the site from a mobile phone, but for the Stories function in particular, the title and the story text boxes are only available online. Thus, I surmise that the stories told here are all stories told post-facto, and that the photos used for the story have been selected from available material in the user's album and then edited into "coherent stories". None of the stories use video clips or sound. 44 stories provide short

texts to supplement the photos, 20 stories only have the title as text.

## 6.3 Narrative conventions

In comparison to the somewhat random content of the Mobile Marathon project, contrary to what one might expect in this non-competitive context, many of the stories found under the "Stories" heading can be experienced as coherent stories or narratives, which focus on a particular experience (travels) or culture, or specific objects or photos. Some of the Stories do however function more as explanations than as narratives, and some Stories seem mainly to serve as placeholders for photos. In general, it seems that providing users with an explicit storytelling frame (cf. the input screen provided as part of the set-up) do indeed encourage users to think in a more story-oriented way. Many of the stories without text are stories about travels and impressions, "extraordinary" sights that do not need text in order to be understood, but nevertheless present a clear focus and underlying meaning to be deducted from the photos.

When text is used, stories are often told or interpreted primarily through the text, with the photos serving as illustrations of the stories. Many do apply a conscious ending to their story, albeit it ironically, as is the case with a "one photo" story by the user profile "makahuhu". The low quality photo depicts a man and a small Asian woman at a bar, and the accompanying story goes:

One day Don was walking down the street, and he accidentally stumbled into a gay bar. He said... hey Jim, I didn't know you were a regular here.

And they lived happily ever after.

[<http://www.23hq.com/makahuhu/story/97325>]

On a similar notes, one of the more test-oriented stories simply ends "That's all, folks!" indicating that when provided as an explicit possibility (a text box), the convention of "an ending" will appeal to and be used by users.

## 6.4 Reader participation

As mentioned, the 23 website allows for viewer comments on all photos and also allows comments on the stories. Users can subscribe to an email service which notifies the user when a new comment is made. As all photos have each their page, individual photos can get comments, and some of the photos appearing in the Stories section might have been commented on as individual photos. For the purpose of this study, only comments submitted to the "Stories" themselves have been counted, and out of all the Stories I have looked at (the 37 test stories included), only five stories got comments, and then only one or two comments. Two of these Stories were stories about a victory for an Extreme Sports team. Another story simply got the comment "Hi". It is therefore difficult to draw any conclusions on the amount of viewer/reader interaction going on, apart from the fact that viewers do not seem interested in engaging with the storytellers through the Stories function. One of the very few elaborate comments noticeably point to the perceived value of *sharing* stories in this way. A viewer "Lorre" comments on a one-photo-story about the taking of a photo of a very beautiful lit garden:

...stumbled upon this site...and what a visual treat it is!  
*Thanks for sharing!* With all of the growth in such a drab and dreary way concerning where I grew up...it's refreshing to see that such simplistically beautiful places still exist somewhere  
...[<http://www.23hq.com/Mentor/story/264977>, my emphasis]

## 7. MOBILE STORYTELLING ANNO 2007

What can be deducted about the state of storytelling with mobile devices from this study of three different frameworks for presenting user content? First and foremost, judging from the amount of editing and textual supplements, the study of all three cases indicates that even if users can share photos and texts instantly, many people still prefer to tell stories “post facto” rather than storytelling “on the spot”. Since the websites are all as a rule publicly accessible, people do perhaps take care in sharing something “proper” with their audience, if they are not just fooling around to test the system. Perhaps it makes a difference whether we share our stories with friends or family only, or if we share them with total strangers? As the photos on the reviewed sites have no timestamps, it is however difficult to estimate how many were instantly uploaded.

Secondly, it appears that narrative conventions and traditional ways of telling stories are still dominant. The study of the stories submitted to [getmoving.dk](http://getmoving.dk) shows that storytellers draw on conventions from ads and movies in their stories, when they are asked to convey a very specific message with their stories. Winners of both the [getmoving.dk](http://getmoving.dk) and the Mobile Marathon competitions appear to be those who tells the most “designed” and edited stories, so also jury members seem to judge stories according to “old media” story conventions. However, the many different ways, “Stories” are interpreted on the 23 website seem to indicate that stories will indeed be told in many different ways when there is no predefined theme and no competitive pressure on producing “the best” story. In all three cases, it seems that titles are very important. If users take the time to make up their own titles, an explicitly structured story as rule follows. It is a noticeable finding that attempts to support storytelling with digital photos thus seem to hinge on and encourage a very traditional understanding of what a narrative is, and of how the process of storytelling should be structured. In this context, it might be relevant to compare my findings with those related in a paper on a photo sharing and telling system called iTell. The iTell design project documented by Landry and Guzdial [11] focused on the design of a system which also allowed users to organise and tell stories in a very structured way. Intriguingly, the authors observed about their three respondents:

“surprisingly, participants reported excluding portions of their experience when they did not have media to visually represent them ([9]p. 166)”

Their observation suggest that people will develop their story around available photos, rather than letting the “real” experience frame the story. This also seems to be the case at 23 where people will for instance support photos taken on travels with stories about these travels, or will combine photos they have already uploaded with fun texts that tell an engaging, but

not necessarily true, story about them. The story clips about daily exercise submitted to the [getmoving.dk](http://getmoving.dk) site indicate that even if many of the amateur storytellers mostly focus on traditional forms of exercise – there is a tendency to tell stories they believe other might find are “cool” or which present current “hot” forms of exercises. Hence, even if the stories in all three cases do focus on aspects and glimpses of everyday life, and demonstrate a somewhat unpolished discourse about quite normal everyday experiences, in general the *forms* of storytelling taking place draws on conventions for dramatic storytelling (which is usually about unusual events), and seem to “aim to please”.

Thirdly, there are not a lot of viewer/reader/user activity around these stories – the social afterlife of the stories are quite poor. They attract few comments, and judging from the few comments made, most are positive and made by friends or people who know the storytellers. However, when the possibility of rating is visibly possible, people do partake of the rating possibility, at least this seems to be the case with the [getmoving.dk](http://getmoving.dk) site where almost all stories got rated. Thus, a notable difference between the [getmoving.dk](http://getmoving.dk) site and the Mobile Marathon site is that on [getmoving.dk](http://getmoving.dk) the ratings are visualised (coloured stars) and easily accessible as part of the “interface” to the individual story. On the Mobile Marathon sites, ratings are only given as written numbers and the viewer has to scroll to the bottom of the page to rate the story. In accordance with general rules for interface design, this indicates that stories will get rated if the rating system is clearly visible and immediately at hand. The fact that users believe that ratings will play a part in the final judging of stories participating in a competition might also be influential.

Finally, previous studies have primarily focused on the sharing of personal photos and use of either experimental or general photo-sharing systems. Few have looked what happens when people storytell for competitive purposes or in an event-based setting; or at what form of storytelling unfolds when mobile photo sharing is specifically presented as “Stories” in an open and public setting. This study has demonstrated that by looking at already available storytelling frameworks, we can learn much about the current state of storytelling with mobile media, and about the stories people chose to tell and share based on this material. Providing rather rigid frameworks for storytelling (such as a time frame or a theme) seem to spur creativity, if the context is taken into consideration. Yet it appears, that the stories told are yet not shared on the spot, but produced and edited post-facto. However the nature of the “raw material” available for making the stories is indeed changing the content of the stories told; and at best provides a window to other cultures and other ways of going about “daily life”.

### 7.1 Telling as a “new” form of sociality?

Based on this study, does it still make sense to argue that new forms of storytelling are emerging with the advent of the medium of “the mobile”? At this point in time, a tentative answer may be that even if frameworks for storytelling do seem to encourage users to make stories of and with their photos, sharing experience online is still very much an act of one-way communication that draws on existing narrative conventions. The stories (in this survey) do not stimulate a lot of social interaction, though the popular act of “rating” is indeed a

passive form of social interaction (an anonymous comment on the quality of your story). However, the fact that already many people engage in storytelling *because* they want to share their experiences or be recognised by a larger community indicate that in the future many more people will engage in mobile storytelling as a form of social activity. Mobile phone producers seem to agree: recent models of Nokia (N72, N73 and N93) and Sony Ericsson high quality camera phones (k600i and the k800 series) are delivered with a “blog” option directly integrated in the photo handling menu, allowing users to post directly to either a Flickr (Nokia) or Blogger (Sony Ericsson) account which is created the first time the user sends a photo. Furthermore, commercial initiatives such as Nokia’s “Lifeblog” indicate that there seem to be a new market for software which allow users to collect all their digital communication in one place. Organising this material as a set of stories might be an obvious way to give it structure. Thus, Nokia’s Lifeblog claims to support the user’s need to create “an organic timeline” of his digital recordings, offering the possibility to “browse the time of your life”. At the end of the day, perhaps the person, users most eagerly want to share their content with, is their own online profile?

It remains to be seen which frameworks of storytelling, mobile users in the long run will prefer. This study indicates, that websites with functionalities that concretely help users tell stories with their own material might inspire them to try, but leaves them with very little motivation for doing it. Commercial or educative projects like the getmoving.dk and the mobile marathon project encourage traditional forms of storytelling but at least motivate users to share their experiences and efforts. These two motivations for sharing, the personal competitive and the communal reaching-out, are likely to continue to exist side by side, forcing us to constantly choose where we get the most out of telling our stories, and forcing us to make choices of what to share, with whom, and where and when to do it. Thus, we will not see “Hamlet” told as a mobile story anytime soon, but as storytellers we are bound to learn even more about the difficulty of choice, about how living with technology always at hand can potentially turn all aspects of our lives into shared stories.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Casper Villier of La Familia, Kasper Kofod of FLOC and Thomas Mygdal-Madsen of 23hq for sharing thoughts and information about their storytelling projects and frameworks with me.

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