


Storytelling via interactive video?



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By Archita Suryanarayanan

CHENNAI: Storytelling and the oral medium, one of oldest traditions in the world, is one that may appear archaic at first, especially in the era of YouTube channels and mobile apps to explore animal sounds.

But this method of using the body and voice for dramatic effect — travelling with one's mind — can even be a form of therapy, one which no digital device can ever replace. But is there a possible middle path where both the digital and the human element can come together for a storytelling experience? One way could be video-conferencing, says Eric Miller, director, World Storytelling Institute, who has been conducting sessions through video-conferencing where people across the world come together and narrate stories.

“Storytelling relies on using the voice and body, in a live social gathering. Is a video the same? Not quite. But this method uses technology with the simulation of human presence, and if designed well, you can forget that people are far away,” he says, using video-streaming for this interview.

A typical video-conferencing session has a small group of people, often from different countries, who take turns to tell a story interactively. They pause, while the others give their comments and analysis. Some are mythological tales from India while others are folktales from Spain, which an American could respond by drawing parallels to her local culture. And you can participate in all of this, right from your home in Chennai.

“In story-listening and reading, the listeners and readers visualise various elements of the story; so these mediums require the receiver to be an active co-creator of the story. When a teller speaks as a character to another character, the listener becomes the character being addressed; this causes a deep psychological and

emotional participation. This is unique to the story-listening process,” says Eric. When a teller speaks as Mowgli to Bagheera from The Jungle Book, for instance, the listener can take the character of Bagheera.

Through storytelling and interacting, we can slowly relearn the art of conversation, offer suggestions, respond to topics, and even recover after an embarrassing situation, he adds. The next step to mobilise this tool should be an infrastructure where one can find people of similar interests who wish to engage in conversation on a particular topic. “For example, I live in Chennai but I’m from New York and would like to find a group to discuss the US elections. It will be great if this happens,” he says. “The art and craft of conversation can soon make a comeback. I feel storytelling and videoconferencing might have a wonderful future together.”

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