guide to

the digital story model

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This guide is meant as an introduction to the digital story model. It will first present you with the purpose of the model and how you should approach it. Then you will be introduced to the individual steps in the model and what you are supposed to focus on during the process. Finally, you will get some pointers on how to work with the model.

Unfolding a story on a digital medium has possibilities that can't be leveraged by traditional paper and broadcast media. Its dynamic nature invites to engagement and interaction, thereby making the user an active part of the story. Adding complexity to the storyline often also means drawing on more resources in order to build the final product. It is often easier to take a picture, than to edit a video. It is cheaper to write down a text piece, than to build interactive maps, it is often easier to get an understanding of a topic with static modalities (text, images) or dynamic modalities (sound, video) than by developing interactive experiences like games, VR or AR experiences and so on.

New creative tools continue to bring new creative possibilities to writers and designers, making it easier to build complex digital stories. For individual designers, but even more for teams of complementing skillsets.

We have developed this model as a way to explore, structure and manage the creation of digital stories. You can use it as an individual to make sure, that you don't rush the process and start to develop content early on that may need to be altered later. It also works on a reflective level helping you to see your story on an abstract level before diving into the meat on the bones of the story.

The model is also well suited as a shared method in a team. Each step focus on different aspects of the design process making it easier for a team to collaborate, create and hand over concrete elements of a story while still being able to have a shared focus on the story as a whole.

The following is a brief presentation of the steps in the model and some guidance and suggestions on how and what to focus on during that part of the process.
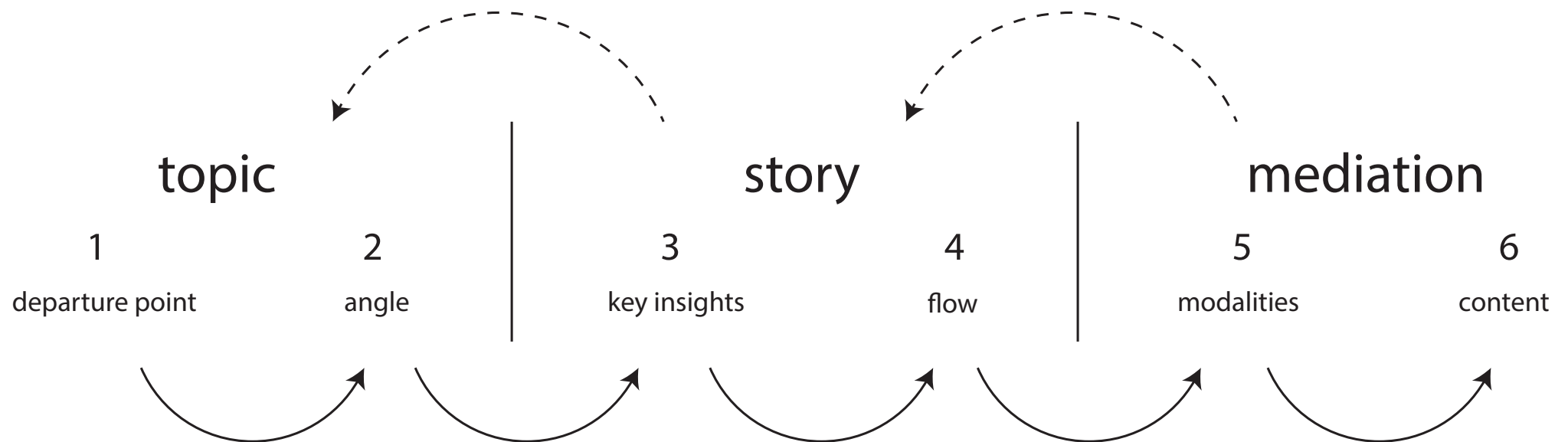
Good luck creating interesting and inspiring digital stories
Karsten Vestergaard and Steffen Moestrup

Why this model?

Presentation of the model

The Digital Story Model (below) shows individual steps in the process of making stories on digital media. The model is supposed to support you in the creation of everything from traditional linear stories in text to complex multi-linear experiences.

It is divided into three phases (topic, story and mediation) that each suggests a mindset and a set of relevant associated tasks you need to complete in order to effectively move to the next part of the process.

In the coming pages you will be introduced to the individual steps and get a clearer understanding of what they contain.

topic   story   mediation

1   2   3   4   5   6

departure point   angle   key insights   flow   modalities   content

Topic phase

This first phase is all about framing what your story is about and in what domain it resides. Your process will benefit immensely from a solid understanding of what you are going to tell, to whom and on what platform you are going to tell it. The following is an explanation on the elements of the topic phase.
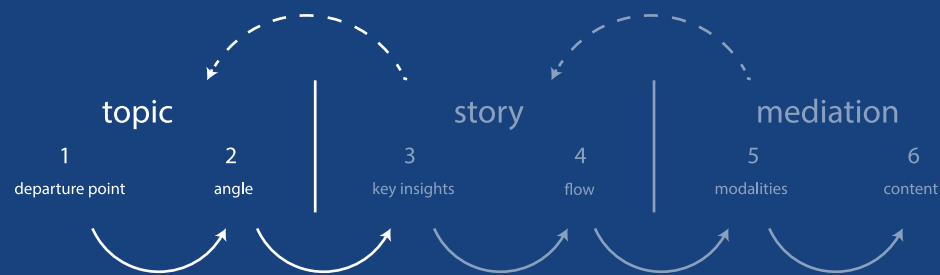
Step 1: Departure Point

The departure point is where your design process starts. It can be a deliberate task given to you by an external person or a planned development in an ongoing story. But it can also be based on serendipity as something you experience and wonder about, a piece breaking on Twitter and so on. Finally, it can be something you think needs further clarification, like a piece of statistic, a new research report or discovery or information received from other sources.

Your departure point can come to you on top of a larger research, where you may have a lot of material, or as an open question, that needs to be further investigated.

Step 2: Angle

In the angle phase, you are getting very specific on what you are going to tell the audience. Write the *core sentence* for the narrative you are working on. Something like:

I want to tell ...

And define the main audience and platform for the story. Something like:

I want to tell it to X, and I will tell it using Y *(e.g., desktop, mobile, AR, VR)*

The core sentence should preferably be one line and serve as an overarching guide for the rest of your work. You should be able to hold it up as a litmus paper on all decisions taken in the coming steps, like: "How does this part support my core sentence?" and "What kind of materials do I need to make my core sentence become clear to the user?"
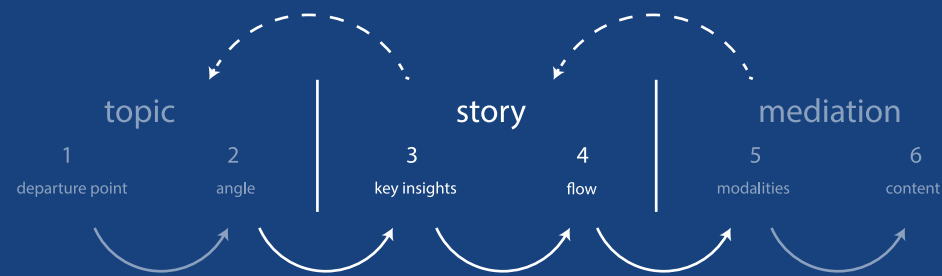
It is also important that you early on focus on the audience and platform. Of course, you could go deep with personas and detailed explanation target groups, but we encourage you to settle with less. A conscious attitude to whether you are talking to young or old, layman or from a specific profession can inform your decisions later (writing style, graphic design etc.). Another way to relate to your audience is to consider the media outlet where your story will be published and then frame your story in relation to the audience of that specific media outlet.

An early decision on platform can also greatly inflict on possibilities and style of story. There is a completely different set of requirements if you are targeting AR or VR, than if you are targeting desktop browsers. Even differences from desktop to mobile can dictate text amount vs. images, navigation principles etc.

With a clear understanding of the topic and angle, it is now time to build the story.

Story phase

In this phase you will compose and structure the elements of your story. It is important to get a clear understanding of the story as a whole and the weight of individual parts before creating or finalizing the content. You will define the main pointers, that you want to drive through, and suggest emotional impact on the reader. Finally, you will order the parts of the story in relation to each other and define how they relate.

topic | **story** | **mediation**

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| departure point | angle | key insights | flow | modalities | content |

Step 3: Key Insights
In this section you write down, what key insights you want the reader to have experiencing the story . Write it down on post-it physically or digitally. Think of insight as an accurate and deep understanding of something. These insights can be rooted in several origins such as observations from reality, interviews, the use of non-dialogue sources, your research as well as data created by yourself. The insights will also in many ways relate to your angle and *core sentence*.

The insight can of course be very direct and specific, like *explain what was bought in the Supermarket*. But the insight can also have a more general and indirect nature, like *hear Martin's story or show complications in the current situation*. The key insights are the building blocks of your story.

Next to each insight, try briefly to describe two aspects of the insight: 1) what they should understand going through this section (factual information) and if relevant 2) how they should feel after reading the section (upset, curious, relieved, happy, provoked etc.)

Adding this to the insight informs your tone of voice and help you in the flow section, where you connect the insights.

Step 4: Flow
This is the last section of the story phase. You now have all the main components of your story described. Now you need to structure the individual parts into a coherent story. You can do it simply by moving your post-it's around and draw connecting lines between them. You can also use digital tools like Miró to structure the story.

Start by placing each insight after when they will be presented for the reader. What will they experience first (the lead of the story), what comes next and so on. This may result in a linear story with one insight after another. That is perfectly ok, and will in many ways mimic a traditional article flow with text and images.

You may also decide that several insights can be chosen from a central place. It can be interviews with four people where you want the reader to decide in what order (s)he wants to experience them. In these cases you can add a *hub* in form of a post-it and in the same way as in the insight step add what the user will see and how (s)he will feel about seeing it.

With the example of the four interviews, the hub could state something like *overview of the four employees*. The factual part could state that it is *thumbnail of people overlaying a background showing a very messy desk*. The emotional part could state that the reader shall *have a feeling of a company that is falling apart*.

Moving between key insights and flow
During development of the flow, you may come up with new insights because you research more on your story and find new data, new materials, new sources etc. You realize that a connection between other parts of the story is missing, or you just get a sudden inspiration of new elements to the story, that would be fruitful. In that case, you just add them to the diagram.

Before you move on

Now you should have a clear overview of your story. You haven't produced any finalized content yet, but the scaffolding gives you a solid understanding of the progress even without having any content created yet. You can also end up with a feeling, that the impact of the story is thin or that the story is not relevant or interesting enough. If that is the case, now is the time either do some more research on the topic or jump back to the *topic phase* and revisit the framing of the story and its *core sentence.*

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Mediation phase

Now, with the structure of your story in place it is time to pay attention to how you will present it. In this phase you will take all the insights and sections and define which modality that serves the purpose best.
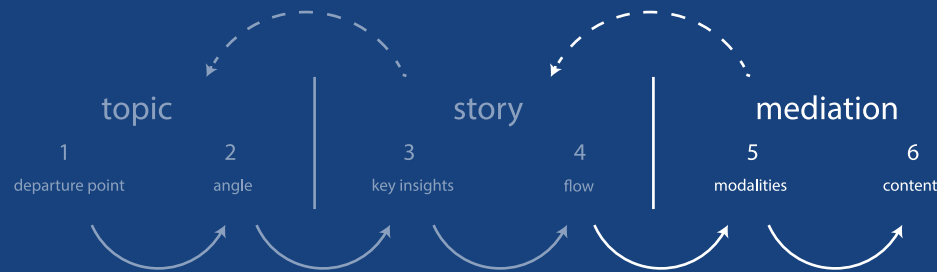
Style
You may have thought of it intuitively. If not, now is a good time to think about the style of the story. Is it humorous, is it business. Is it for kids or is it for sports fanatics. You don't have to do the style yourself but having a clear feeling of it informs which modality that serves the purpose the best.

A lot of this may be self-understood because of your insights in the previous phase. But, if this inspires you to new insights, please go back and add those to the flow.

Step 5: Modalities
A modality in this context is a representation of an insight. There are generally three categories named static, dynamic and interactive.

The *static modalities* are the ones, that can be experienced as a single impression. This is for example text, images, maps, graphs, or timelines. These modalities don't dictate how and what the user is supposed to engage with.

The *temporal modalities* are the modalities, that unfolds themselves over time. This is things like audio, video and animation. Common to these modalities are that you start the modality and experience it, while it unfolds.

Finally, there is the *interactive modalities*. These modalities draw upon the other modalities but add a layer of user engagement. These modalities are things like navigation, interaction, and gamification. You can have a traditional timeline or a timeline you can interact with. You can have images or interactive images. You can even have small games embedded, that consist of several images and sounds to give a game-like experience that perhaps allows the user to understand the story on a new level.

With each key insight or hub, define which modality that would mediate the message best. It can be a single modality or a combination of two or three. The main idea here is to get the abstract understanding of your story to a more concrete level, where you can communicate your project in collaboration with others.

Is it ok to move on?
Working with the modalities can spawn a lot of new ideas. Luckily, you haven't created any final content yet. You may have thought of an interactive map which spawned the idea of some new insights to bring to the user. If this is the case, then go back and add them to the diagram.

Step 6: Content
This is the final part. Now, you are going to create the final content. If you are a writer, you can write those parts. If you are a graphic artist, you can work on the style and design the elements.

If you are a programmer, you can work with the interactivity. Maybe, you are a bit of it all ... be my guest :)

Based on your project, you need to work with the rest of the team to build the final experience. This experience can go from a simple text piece to a virtual reality game. Whatever it is, you can use your insights and added emotional specifications to produce the individual bricks in the story. Use the diagram you created and checkmarks to keep track of the process. And always bear in mind that the model should be thought of as a dynamic tool where you continuously move back and forth while building the best possible story.

Working with the model

Now, that you have been introduced to the model, it may be a good time to give you some pointers on how to work with the model. Models like this are simplifications of the real world and will always leave elements out that you may find important. Use this the digital story model as guide to the process that help you making sure, that relevant tasks are taken in a reasonable order.
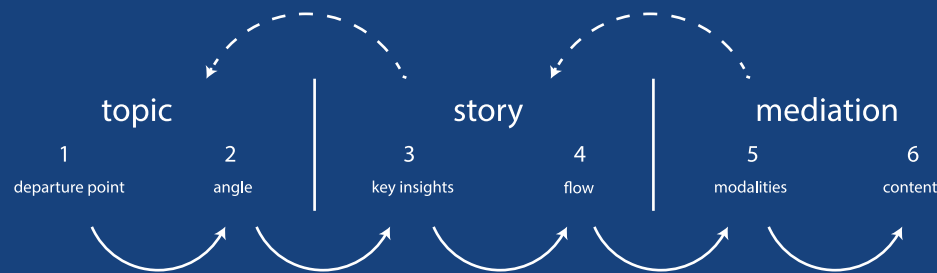
Order of abstraction

The model deals with all the decisions you take until content is created or finalized. As you can see, step number 6 is where you get concrete and produce the final content. A good way of seeing this is that the first section (topic) has the highest level of abstraction. You can easily switch from one angle to another without investing too many resources. You can even completely change topic based on new inputs during the phase – no harm done.

Getting to the second phase, the story phase, you are working on a structural level. You do have a clear path and can't wander about in other topics. But you can unfold the angle easily by diagramming the structure of your story. Even with a linear text piece, you still need a structure stating what to start with and how to end the story.

If you are designing a complex multilinear story, this phase is crucial because you are able to conceive the story as a whole and make changes to the storyline before going into the resource demanding task of creating the content. Post-it's easily switched around, sections are added or discarded without you having invested heavily in it.

Finally, there is the Mediation phase, that is the most concrete phase. Here, you are defining the look and feel of the story, what type of modality to use and finally create the content. When you are in this phase, you should be very much in production mode. All your creations here are based on reasoned choices made in the previous steps and you can focus on creating content.

Arrows and bars

This way of going from abstract, over structural to concrete is a good metaphor for when you are working. If you are creating content and greater issues arise. Then you may have to leave the production mode and go back a step to your diagram and look at it with a more structural mindset. This is where the arrows and bars come in.

There are two sets of arrows. One set with solid lines and one set with dashed lines. The solid lines are the ones that you are using to follow the process. In a perfect world, you would just jump from one to the next but real life is different. Therefore, you can use the dashed arrows to step back in the process if you can see that you are struggling with the steps of the current phase and don't have a clear approach to the tasks that is ahead of you.

When you reach a vertical bar in the model you are also sort of signing off with the previous phase. Ask yourself if you completed the steps and feel confident with the result. When you cross this line everything you do in the next phase might have a dependency to decisions made in the previous phase.

Of course, you are free to jump back and forth between phases – maybe as a part of a creative process. There can also be situations where you must work more freely. Maybe, you are waiting for confirmation on something at a structural level and are using the waiting time creating content. Finally, if there are more people in a team, where one person is good at writing, one is good at designing, and another is good at programming. Here, you can send one person ahead of you and do parts that can inspire the rest of the team in previous steps. The main

point that this model tells you is, that it often comes with a cost and everyone in the team can orient themselves and where other team members are in the process.

Everything between

Working with models is always a matter of leaving things out in order to get a clearer picture of the important parts that is left. In that process we have only kept what we felt is omnipresent in the creation of digital stories. With that said, the model must merge with the existing practice of the person using it. This means that you should be aware of tasks that you traditionally need to do in respect to your practice and find out, where they are best suited. If you are a journalist, you may need to do new research between most of the steps, if you are a designer, you may work with visualizations and mood boards earlier on.

When figuring out, where elements of your previous practice is best positioned, it is a good idea to think of them in terms of level of abstraction as mentioned earlier. This gives you the best condition for an effective workflow.

Better with practice

As with many things in life, this model also gets better with a bit of practice - new things are met with trust while old things are met with familiarity. It can be difficult to blindly trust the flow of the model if you don't have practical experience with the later steps. In depth knowledge of creating content in different modalities will intuitively inspire and inform your decisions in the early stages.

It is natural to feel a bit uncertain the first few times using this model as a guide. You don't know how much time to allocate and which trouble you may meet down the road. We hope that you, with a few stories produced, will have internalized experiences from the phases of the model and can work more freely and intuitive.

With that we wish you good luck with using the model to produce captivating, informative, engaging and/or thought-provoking digital stories.

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