

Telling True Stories: Adventures in Multimedia Nonfiction Narrative

Fawn Canady
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas
United States
fawn.canady@unlv.edu

Troy Hicks
Central Michigan University
United States
troy.hicks@cmu.edu

Abstract: The Digital Storymakers, a multimedia narrative nonfiction contest from 2013, is recast in the post-truth era that challenges those of us teaching media literacy. In December of 2012, the media welcomed what was immediately described at the time as “the future of online journalism,” with the publication of The New York Times’ multimedia piece, “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek,” which ultimately won both the Pulitzer and a Peabody (Cardon, 2012). This transformed not just journalism, but how English teachers could conceptualize multimedia research in the classroom. For a high school English teacher, this contest made visible some of the most difficult aspects of narrative nonfiction, namely, students had to reinterpret facts to form a cohesive and somewhat literary whole using the best media for the job. These conversations – about media literacy, about knowledge making, about narrative nonfiction – are as relevant now as they were in 2013 and, we contend, they will be as students continue to learn how to create substantive texts where they, themselves, are not only working to decipher credible sources of information but to become knowledge makers as well. As English educators, we have become increasingly aware about how we must work with students, in the process of multimodal composing, to make sure that we value “persistence, adaptability, and flexibility and recognize that ambiguity can benefit the research process” (ACRL, 2015).

Keywords: digital storytelling, narrative non-fiction, media literacy, information literacy, multimodality, English education

Introduction

Maisie (all names are pseudonyms) and I¹ had just finished a writing conference on her group’s narrative nonfiction story, a serious piece that explored a teen’s experience with drug addiction. The draft was well written, from a factual standpoint, but they were struggling with narrative conventions. It just didn’t read like a story, at least not the kind of compelling, nonfiction stories we had been exploring as mentor texts, and I had shared this in my feedback to her.

Suddenly, overcome with anger and frustration, she stood up, threw her papers into the air, and yelled, “I just want to write a research paper!” a not uncommon initial reaction

Maisie, an 11th grader who was well aware of the conventions of five paragraph essays and typical academic prose, wasn’t alone in her frustration. We had been working for weeks, weaving research into a narrative structure, all the while exploring digital media.

In the end, other students, in spite of challenges, found the project rewarding. Nathan, who had worked on the foundations of a documentary-style video on the role of hygiene in the spread of disease, reflected that the most enjoyable aspect of the project was “being able to create a story out of fact and reinterpret it for a different audience.”

¹ We write from Fawn’s perspective, though authorship of this piece has been a collaborative effort between Fawn and Troy. We maintain the first person voice for clarity and concision.

Yet, in that moment, her papers fluttering to the floor, I looked at Maisie, wondering what I had asked my students to do and whether it would, indeed, be worth the effort.

Context for the Project: “The Future of Online Journalism”

In December of 2012, the media welcomed what was immediately described at the time as “the future of online journalism,” with the publication of *The New York Times*’ December 2012 multimedia piece, “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek,” which ultimately won both the Pulitzer and a Peabody (Cardon, 2012). *The Atlantic* summarized the design and the content this way:

Unlike a standard words-on-page article that doesn't diverge too much from print in the design department, “Snow Fall,” a multi-“chapter” series by features reporter John Branch, integrates video, photos, and graphics in a way that makes multimedia feel natural and useful, not just tacked on (Greenfield, 2012). And, while I had no presumption that students would be able to make something quite so nuanced, complex, and complete, a new opportunity had presented itself, and about 70 of my 11th grade Honors English students, across two classes, and about 10 journalism students were going to embark on a new multimodal composing adventure through a project sponsored by an online publishing platform, Atavist, and Pearson, the educational publishing company: The Digital Storymakers Award. The focus for the work was on longform journalism, or pieces that are generally at least 5,000 words or more in length, and with compelling multimedia elements embedded in the stories.

This project was challenging both for students and for me as a teacher. It invited students to research something they found deeply interesting, yes; but, instead of writing a research paper (a genre that, by 11th grade, was quite familiar), students would compose multimedia, narrative nonfiction. In other words, it felt as if we were covering new ground, as I was asking them to create longform journalism in a multimedia format, a format that had recently been reinvented by Snow Fall and brought to our doorstep with the opportunity from Atavist and Pearson. Despite a decade and a half of being on the information superhighway, we finally had a new on ramp, and there were opportunities at hand for my students to, finally, share their writing with a wider audience, well beyond my classroom or even our school.

The Digital Storymakers project made visible some of the most difficult aspects of narrative nonfiction (A selection of student examples demonstrating the range of student projects can be found in Table 1). Namely, students had to reinterpret facts to form a cohesive and somewhat literary whole using the best media or mode for the job. The library media specialist was also key player, and he assisted in a range of media literacy instruction throughout the project. The school, a large public Career and Technical Academy high school focused on project-based learning (PBL), strongly encouraged interdisciplinary collaboration. Author 1 initiated and led the project, which began with researching and writing narrative nonfiction as a foundation for digital multimodal compositions. Small teams of writers from Fawn’s English and journalism classes “contracted out” multimedia work to students with expertise in various aspects of multimedia production, depending on the needs of the story (a process described in more detail below).

Table 1. Selection of digital stories produced by students in Author 1’s class for Digital Storymakers.

Additionally, as Maisie’s dramatic exclamation shows, writing is difficult and students tend to cope by figuring out early in the game how to “play school.” Writing becomes an exercise in giving the teacher what they want. Sure, we could have done research papers, as Maisie bemoaned, but I wanted my students to explore more authentic ways to show and tell true stories.

we're trying to avoid this

Reinterpretation of facts in the contested space of the classroom is tricky in a “truth isn’t truth²” era. Especially when emerging scholarship suggests that teaching the core skills of media literacy in a post-truth information ecosystem— where fact-checking does little to dissuade people from sharing misinformation— is simply not enough (boyd, 2018). Researcher Alice E. Marwick (2018) suggests that sharing information like fake news “reveals complex social motivations that will not be easily changed” (p. 477). Stories reinforce identities and strengthen ties to social groups (Marwick, 2018). Therefore, the media students interact with everyday is potentially more than a resource for making meaning, but is also interwoven with the stories they tell themselves about who they are and what they believe. People share the stories that resonate most with them on a fundamental level.

Media literacy education must also address the social and cultural aspects of information literacy. Furthermore, people are not passive consumers of information; they actively fill gaps in data in ways similar to constructing a continuous narrative (boyd, 2018). Sense-making and knowledge production, then, share affinities

² Statement made by President Trump’s personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani on Meet the Press.

with narrative, “the ‘mother of all modes,’ a powerful and innate form of understanding” (Newkirk, 2014, p. 6). These tensions prompted me (Fawn) – five years, an earned Ph.D., and an American Presidential election later – to partner with Troy in a reflective, analytical look at a project that had clearly struck a nerve with my students.

The Digital Storymakers Project

The Digital Storymakers Award was only held once in the spring of 2013. I stumbled upon it by chance as I was looking for a platform that would allow my students to produce stories like *Snow Fall*. The award was for “new emerging writers and visual artists whose work makes use of new forms of nonfiction digital narrative” and included high school, undergraduate, and graduate categories (Finkel, 2012, np). Evan Ratliff, the founder of Atavist Magazine, stated the impetus behind the contest this way:

“Our hope is to encourage students to experiment in telling stories in new and compelling ways,” said Ratliff. “Today’s students are developing tremendous digital skills, and journalism’s future rests on how they’ll put those inventive skills to work.” (Finkel, 2012, np)

As it turned out, we had only nine weeks to enter the contest so my students had to put their ‘inventive skills’ into overdrive. I quickly designed a unit around Digital Storymakers, beginning with the three categories for entries:

1. Longform (text-based, over 5,000 words)
2. Short form (text-based, 1,500-5,000 words)
3. Visual (image-based stories)

Furthermore, all entries had to include at least three forms of media, including possibilities for text, audio, video, photos, illustrations, animation, and interactive graphics. As stated earlier, I taught at a PBL school where interdisciplinary projects were encouraged, so recruiting the art, digital media, and photography teachers and their students to support the writers in my English and journalism classes was the logical next step. We assembled all of our classes in the library (also known as the Media Center) where we would have access to resources and ample room for group work.

we draw from most of these kinds of media

Selecting Topics

After the project launch (an entry event with an overview of the project), we grouped students into interdisciplinary teams from all of the different classes (art, digital media, English, journalism, and photography) to encourage conversation. Each group brainstormed topics for 5-7 minutes on large sheets of paper and tagged them with their names. There were a wide range of topics. For example, Jessica, a student in my English class, had the Warped Tour music festival on her brain “all year” and added it to the list. Other students jotted down topics ranging from international spies to drug addiction. After a short period of time, we rotated tables every two minutes in a gallery walk. Students were encouraged to talk about topics, elaborate on them, or write new ideas. Then, students were invited to go back and revisit the most compelling ideas. This is how the story groups were initially formed.

our topics are chosen already, our list of catastrophes

In our current climate of “alternative facts,” laying the foundation early in the year for a project like this one is recommended. For example, if I were to do this project now, I would invite students like Jessica, who have a topic on their minds “all year,” to consider related content covered in the media and follow them over time and across different networks, platforms, and disciplines. This way, when students begin compiling research, they have already covered skills such as locating alternative sources and concepts such as confirmation bias (seeking and using information that simply reinforces our existing beliefs about a topic). In this way, students would be better prepared to consider research as inquiry by re-examining existing information sources and developing an “appropriate scope of investigation” (ACRL, 2015, p. 7) based on their accumulation of knowledge through a variety of perspectives and modes.

i.e., reading, a lot of reading: books, popular mags, science, wiki, other web sites, expert statements

Researching Through Variety of Sources and Modes

Over the next two to three weeks, the other teachers, media specialist, and I each taught lessons in our area of expertise that all of the groups would benefit from learning. Dubbed as sessions “for the good of the group,” these mini-lessons met standards for effective research, including media literacy skills such as evaluating sources, choosing appropriate media, and analyzing information, as well as writing instruction. After these lessons, we often held small, informal “need to know” sessions for any individual or group that had an issues specific to their work. Let’s take Jessica, the lead writer for the Warped Tour project, as an example again. She wanted to know how to use, cite, and publish public social media posts by concert goers. In 2013, this was a relatively new question for ELA curriculum (the eighth edition of the MLA handbook, which brought new clarity to citing digital artifacts, was still three years away from its 2016 publication). In this situation, the folk wisdom around scholarly sources for a “typical” high school research paper doesn’t fit. Social media posts of a concert experience are not scholarly, and might not even be considered ‘fact’, underscoring the idea of “what counts as evidence” (see Figure 1 for an example of a publicly posted social media resource Jessica used in her published story).

Typically, after a “need to know” session, we would debrief the whole group to briefly share what we learned in case another group might find it useful. Jessica’s questions about using and publishing social media was shared in the interest of helping the whole group consider resources and responsibilities of publishing, important aspects of media literacy. And, while there is no clear heuristic for helping students look at information literacy through a renewed framework that reflects issues of context, authority, and the nature of knowledge, we do have a shorthand way of helping students articulate these ideas. We invite students to ask:

- What counts as evidence?
- For whom?
- In what contexts?

Figure 1. Patrick crowd surfing in a published story on The Warped Tour (Ayersman & D’Otvio, 2013)

What Do Stories Want? Composing Narrative with Multimedia

One of the questions I asked students as they composed was this: What does the story want? After we had researched and written at least one full draft, students came together in groups and shared their stories in multimodal workshops. The primary purpose of the workshop was to invite students to read and annotate the stories, noting where they wanted to see, hear, or link to more information that would add to the story rather than distract from it. This helped the groups decide which media to include and, subsequently, give the teachers information on which multimedia lessons were needed. Original content was privileged in the contest because the stories would be published publicly on the app. To avoid violating copyright, many students chose to produce artwork essential to communicating to the narrative in a way that the written text could not accomplish alone. The art teacher capitalized on this opportunity to teach lessons about how to choose artistic media (charcoal, watercolor, oils, pencil, etc.) and color to communicate emotion or concepts in an image. One example of the use of medium and color was original artwork was from the story *Silent House* written in prose and poetry and based on research of the progression of severe mental illness (Dobrzyn, Freid, and Munson, 2013). One image in particular expresses the loneliness, sadness, and confusion of the main character with melting features painted with watercolor (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Screenshot images from the published story, *Silent House* (Dobrzyn, Freid, & Munson, 2013)

Silent House was also a unique piece that pushed us to explore alternative ways of “knowing” through creative or imaginative writing based on research. Two poems from *The Silent House*, which was also an award finalist published on the Atavist Digital Storymakers App, are quoted in Table 2. The students who wrote these poems blurred the lines between research and presentation of factual information.

Table 2. Poems from the publicly published story, *Silent House* (Dobrzyn, Freid, & Munson, 2013)

So, What's the Story? Organizing Data, Finding Patterns

Knowledge creation is an iterative process and the resources used depend largely on the format of the delivery (ACRL, 2015, p. 5). My students gathered information in multiple modes— visual, aural, and textual— to construct digital narratives. This meant that they had ample material to work with, but not enough experience to craft a story out of disparate modes and information sources. Furthermore, as they worked with elements of narrative such as episodes or cause and effect, more questions were generated than answered. It is the ambiguity of the research process for which novices have a low tolerance (ACRL, 2015).

aka, assets

As students delved deeper into their research, we were fortunate enough to have a visitor: journalism professor Scott Winter, now at Bethel University. Winter spoke to students about how the best stories are not necessarily the big events, but rather the surprisingly small connections that make them relatable. He told students to narrow in on the small details that connect us to the stories – even the broad strokes of historical events such as 9/11 are most compelling when we hear about someone's experience of it. To illustrate, he referenced the video on YouTube, "Fifty People, One Question: Brooklyn," that shows close-ups of people on the streets of Brooklyn, all ages, races, and nationalities, answering the question, "where would they would most like to wake in the morning?" As students watched, Winter invited them to consider that there are, indeed, people behind every story. We revisited the narrative elements, thought about cause and effect, and chose elements that would best illustrate the idea of being human. This brief, yet powerful lesson, really helped bring perspective to students.

Looking back at the published stories and without knowing whether humanizing details were intentional, I am particularly drawn to *Wallis and Edward*, about King Edward's scandalous abdication of the throne for a divorcee (Lung, Spiller, and Guerrero, 2013). The authors play on Edward and Wallis' isolation and the sting of the Royal Family's refusal to accept Wallis as a suitable wife:

After a life-long [sic] fight to put love above everything else, Edward his royal Highness Duke of Windsor passed away a month shy of his 78th birthday on May 28, 1972 from cancer. His wife and true love traveled to attend his funeral in England where she was permitted to stay in Buckingham Palace for the first time in her life (Lung, Spiller, and Guerrero, 2013, p. 7).

The subtlety of "for the first time in her life," in our minds, is a humanizing detail for what was a salacious story of the time. The authors remind us that it was Wallis' wish to belong, to be part of the family. Furthermore, the authors utilized pop-out features as part of the narrative. The date of Edward's death was a pop-out timeline that both illustrates the intimacy of the end of an infamous love affair and the scope of their story as part of England's history (Figure 3). Information is not story, it must be shaped into narrative conventions that include a beginning, middle, and end.

Figure 3. Screenshot of a pop-out timeline from *Wallis & Edward* (Lung, Spiller, and Guerrero, 2013).

Publishing

Publishing was the last step, though students had to prepare their stories and multimedia components throughout the process. As mentioned earlier, one of the early workshops conducted during the writing process asked students to annotate each others' texts, identifying areas where they wanted to see, hear, or interact more with information. Students noted locations where Google maps, weblinks, definition pop-ups (called 'extras' in Creativist software), or other information would be useful. In 2013, we used mentor texts from *Atavist Magazine* to explore how professional authors made choices with media. For instance, student authors Berduo, Hoff, and Cotton (2013) illustrated how images contribute meaning to their narrative in Chapter 2 of their story of Hitler's youth (Figure 4). In the text itself, they had described how "the young and easily influenced Hitler would find himself a part of a string of disappointments and difficulties, shaping the young man for his future," such as his failures in art school, using images of Hitler's early artwork that they had found available in the public domain (Berduo, Hoff, and Cotton, 2013, p. 3). As part of a larger narrative, the images underscore what the authors claim is a generally accepted idea that Hitler's failure to "make a name for himself" as an artist closed a fateful door to an alternative outcome— one without the Holocaust— for humanity. Additionally, the authors juxtaposed Hitler's aspirations as an artist with the bitter disappointments that "hardened him mentally" (Berduo, Hoff, and Cotton, 2013, p. 3). Certainly readers of the

text would have been curious to know if Hitler had any talent— this pop-out extra, as Newkirk (2014) might say, scratches an itch.

Figure 4. Screenshot of one of the publicly published stories showing an extra, or pop-out image, (Berduo, Hoff, & Cotton 3)

Publishing was high stakes because of the contest: winners were going to be published on an app by Atavist Magazine. Even for those who did not win, or even finish their project, publishing was public and shared via url. Students vented in their reflections about the lack of time to complete their stories satisfactorily, or about issues with the Beta Creativist software. This difficulty with publishing was a reminder that in this project, interactive technology was the mode of delivery for the story and would impact the way the audience experienced it. Therefore, it was a part of the storymaking process in a way that typical technology tools used in classrooms, such as word processing software, are not. After publication, we conducted gallery walks around computers, where students could read and interact with texts and then leave feedback for each other in another spreadsheet. Feedback ranged from critical, such as comments about writing that missed the narrative mark or was too much like a research paper, to positive feedback that praised the use of imagery, original artwork, descriptive writing, and ‘completeness.’ In the end, even Maisie was proud of what her group had accomplished.

This project created opportunities to develop digital reading and research skills, but also served as an assessment of students’ abilities in many areas: they had practice at research and writing, but also in developing multimodal texts. In other words, instead of thoughtlessly sending or creating information in social media, or writing a research paper in the well-worn format, digital narrative nonfiction pushes students to reconsider how they compile and “reinterpret” information.

Conclusions/Implications

As noted earlier, the description of and reflection upon this project comes five years after the original work was completed in Author 1’s high school classroom. And, as we learned in the process of looking for archived materials, we came to quickly understand that “digital decay” or “link rot” is still a pernicious issue for all online publishers, especially teachers and students who are not particularly well versed in the archival aspects of digital material (Digital, 2018). Still, when examining Author 1’s experience through a contemporary lens where media literacy and digital writing have become, if not commonplace, certainly more integrated in K-12 curricula, the lessons learned from the Digital Storymakers Project are relevant for English teachers who wish to develop “compositional fluency” (Shipka, 2016, p. 252) in their students.

There are several implications which surfaced for us in revisiting a past project. First, in the process of creating this article, we have become increasingly aware about how we must work with students, in the process of multimodal composing, to make sure that they secure appropriate copyright clearance, even with their own, original work. Second, in a time when “fact checking” does little to curb sharing of ‘fake’ news or stories on the internet (Marwick, 2012, p. 475), projects like this encourage students to consider what counts as evidence and on whose authority. Lastly, telling stories taps into aspects of our experience that are typically unconscious. By substituting narrative nonfiction for research papers, we are in effect “make the familiar strange” (Wineburg, 2010, p. 88) and encouraging our students to see knowledge creation differently. Additionally, we are helping them value “persistence, adaptability, and flexibility and recognize that ambiguity can benefit the research process” (ACRL, 2015, p. 7). As Troy (2015) has stated before, “an inquiry-based approach is messy because it leaves space for students to explore their questions and real thinking does not have one clear end” (p. 54). Emphasizing dispositions may reinforce alternative experiences in knowledge creation amid the new realities of post-truth media consumption and production. Finally, I am proud to say that we had some winners! Though the original website was pulled down in 2014, an archived version still houses my students’ work. Use this link to the archived announcement to view the winners: <https://us2.campaign-archive.com/?u=2208236e9bd41d9e37d2fd700&id=955c325f5b>.

consulting multiple independent sources is a safeguard against fake stuff, hence, lots of sources

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Topic	Description	Types of media <i>in addition to</i> text
Hitler’s Youth	Finalist in national competition for high school category. Narrative about Hitler’s youth explores the ‘birth’ of evil.	Images, “extras” (part of the tools in Creativist, such as hyperlinks, maps, pop-outs, images, etc.)
Effects of divorce	Journalistic research and writing on effects of divorce on children. Interviewed a family experiencing family separation. Required the authors to research and develop consent forms for publishing. Emphasis on journalism ethics.	Video, photography, extras
Wallis and Edward	Took first prize in the high school category for the national competition. Historical narrative of the love between King Edward VIII and American divorcée Wallis Simpson.	Pencil sketches, images, maps, and other extras
Mental Health	Finalist. Short story in prose poetry explores the development of psychological disorders and body image issues through a fictional character.	Watercolor
Spread of disease	Documentary film that exploring the spread of disease.	Documentary film format
Korean War	Biography and historical nonfiction. Based on the account of a student’s father, who served in the Korean War. Interviews combined with historical information and included artifacts from the war that belonged to the father.	Original photographs, recorded interview, images of artifacts, extras (maps, etc.)
Bob Lazar and Area 51	Journalistic writing about a former government employee who claimed to have reverse-engineered alien technology.	Art, videos (YouTube), photographs, extras, and digitally enhance photographs.
Warped Tour	A brief history of the music festival, Warped Tour. Primarily sourced from social media.	Embedded social media posts, video, photography, extras

Table 1. Selection of digital stories produced by students in Author 1’s class for Digital Storymakers.

<u>Mobile</u>	<u>Quilt</u>
<p>Gentle pirouettes</p> <p>Mellow cries in the night.</p> <p>Mesmerizing eyes.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">External orbit.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Celestial wanderings.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Silence in the house.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">She will not be a baby for long.</p>	<p>I drape over her body: shrunken cold severe.</p> <p>The cavernous spaces, like trenches running down the sides, welcome me to fill their voids.</p>

Table 2. Poems from the publicly published story, *Silent House* (Dobrzyn, Freid, & Munson, 2013)



Figure 1. Patrick crowd surfing in a published story on The Warped Tour (Ayersman & D’Otvio, 2013)

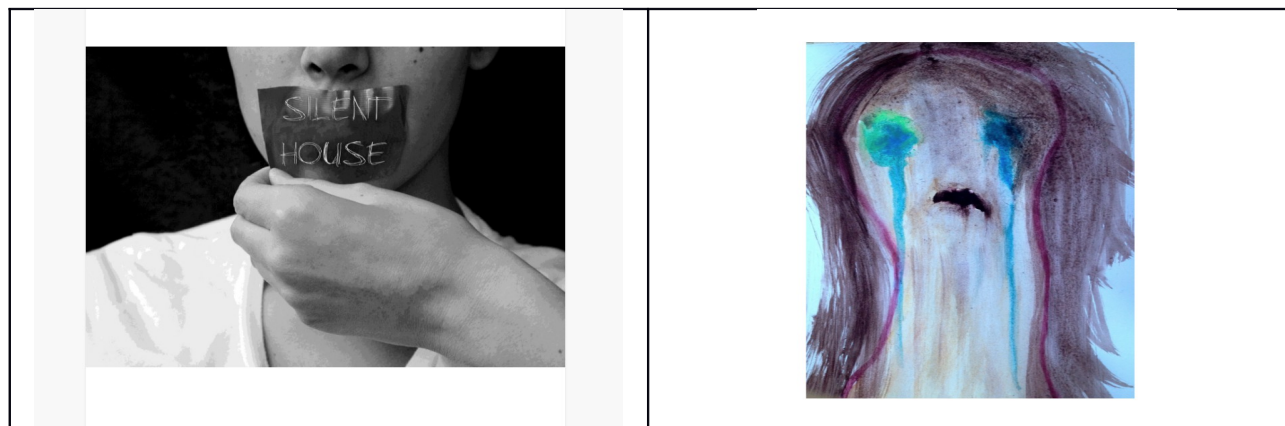


Figure 2. Screenshot images from the published story, *Silent House* (Dobrzyn, Freid, & Munson, 2013)

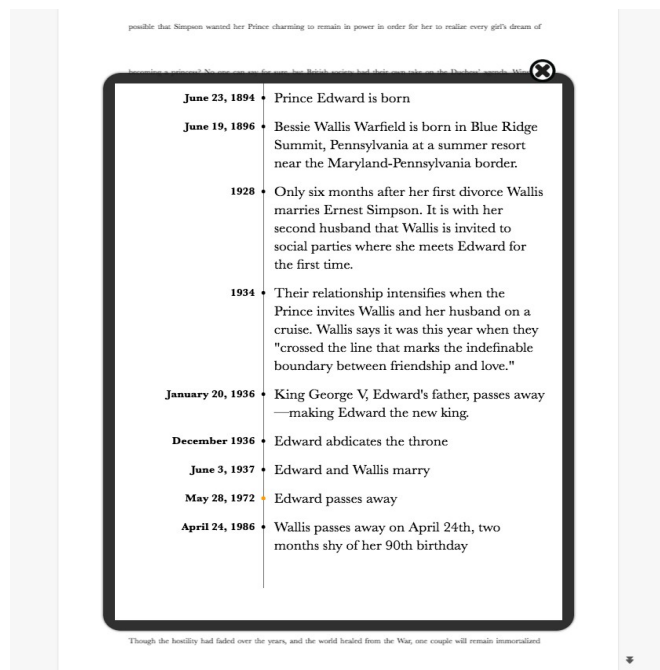


Figure 3. Screenshot of a pop-out timeline from Wallis & Edward (Lung, Spiller, and Guerrero, 2013).

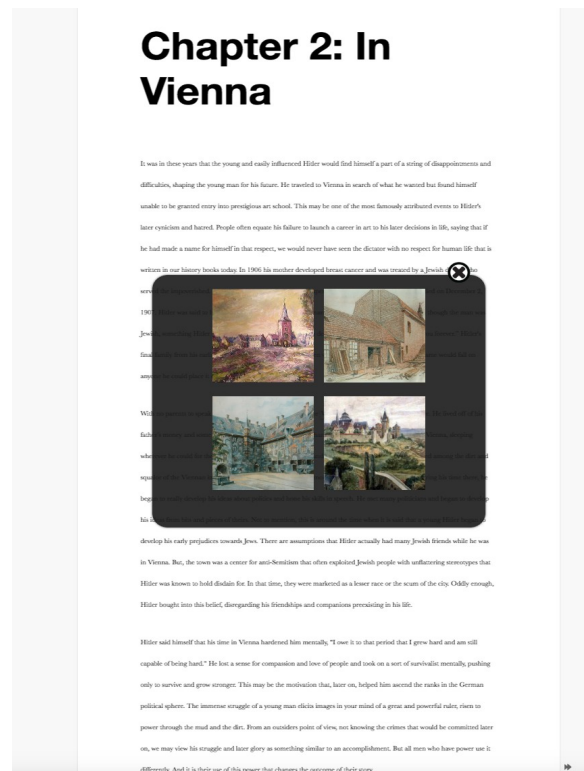


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