

## FOLKLORE AND TRADITION THROUGH EXPRESSIVE FORMS OF DIGITAL MEDIA

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**Abstract:** Digital communication is completely transforming the societal and social aspects of culture and tradition. Technology daily opens new challenges in which the sustainability and authentic features of social groups are integrated into the global world. Modern trends indicate that speed, spectacle, entertainment are the basic principles of global digital communication and that for these reasons small cultures and communities are in danger of disappearing. Disappearance will not be connected with physical erasure of the past, history, tradition, folklore of small nations, but with informational disappearance from the digital world.

Digitization processes create enormous resources that have inestimable importance and value and grow into digital traces of the existence of entire nations and cultures. Those processes simultaneously create advantages, but also challenges for science and the scientific approach. The infrastructure and tools of digital media enable access and classification of materials of different kinds in the form of visual material that represents a research resource for tracking experiences and examples from the folklore tradition. Using interactive social platforms as sources for scientific research is the new paradigm in the study of these phenomena.

**Keywords:** folklore, storytelling, hashtag, video games

The visibility of cultural heritage, sifting through thousands of pieces of information per day, depends on the interest of platforms to share this type of content. Modern trends indicate that speed, spectacle, entertainment are the basic principles of global digital communication and that for these reasons small cultures and communities are in danger of disappearing. The disappearance will not be connected with physical erasure of the past, history, tradition, and folklore of small nations, but with informational disappearance from the digital world. Economic profitability and business interests create a new world, so the contents that are at the center of communication with consumers are dictated precisely by the big companies guided by these priorities.

The world, in a physical sense, already exists on digital platforms. Virtual reality, artificial intelligence tools transfer physical existence into real time. With the development of technology, folklore and tradition as an expression of the culture of peoples and as a heritage that should be passed on to the next generations are faced with finding forms of communication through which they will be a visible part of the great world map of cultures and peoples.

In other words, the development of technological, digital and communication devices creates the need to completely redefine the way cultural heritage, folklore and tradition are transmitted in digital expressive forms. In conditions of global dominance of large cultures, a strategy is necessary that will continue to promote the authentic features of smaller, “invisible” cultures and traditions. Any authenticity is now integrated into the large data orbit of the Internet and is heavily influenced by computerized data processing and analytics processes. On that basis, mass culture and forms of expression become globally acceptable, at the expense of cultures that are not within the scope of algorithmic recognition.

Folklore and tradition in a digital environment are part of the so-called cyber culture, and have digital forms of expression. One of them is the so-called storytelling, through which, in an interactive form (podcasts, videos, video games, posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), folk stories, myths, legends, folklore customs, rituals, etc. are promoted and (re)actualized.

Forms from traditional folklore, with the help of digital tools, get a new expression and a new form of the so-called “hybrid folklore”. The way in which that material is transmitted, the variations that folklore and, in general, cultural artifacts receive through that process – are identical to the forms of transmission of the tradition of oral creativity. “Technology isn’t stamping out folklore; rather it is becoming a vital factor in the transmission of folklore and it is providing an exciting source of inspiration for the generation of new folklore” (Dundes 1980: 17).

With the new digital platforms, folklore is expanding, in terms of new interpretations of tradition, customs, folk songs, myths, legends.

What does hybrid folklore mean?

All the material and the entire cultural heritage are incorporated into new digital forms, which create scripts of rich cultural and folklore material. It is simply a hybridized (digitalized, virtual, technologically mediated) way of (re)actualizing folklore and traditional forms through wide communication arrays that complement the content, expand the variety and create a new resource for folklorists and ethnographers. The mass of these phenomena, however, creates a serious challenge for researchers, especially in the attempt to analyze digital products with scientific methodology.

What makes the specificity of this folklore form is the interactivity in approach and interpretation. In other words, digital platforms allow folklore and tradition to be actively transmitted to a wide audience and thus preserved from the oblivion of time. But in the global communication network, retaining originality is problematic, in terms of the risk of turning it into a commercial goal. “It appears that we have entered an era of ephemeral digital folk culture in which some genres of folklore and the traditional forms of expressive material they generate (e.g., songs, stories, wordplay and wordsmithery,

visual, and narrative humor, etc.) proliferate but often do not always establish a refined, permanent niche within individual repertoires” (Blank 2018: 1).

Folklore in the contemporary context lives on through digital forms and phenomena. With the help of easily accessible tools of digital communication, forgotten forms, customs, cultural characteristics of minority groups are “revived”.

Social media has grown into the most massive communication platform on which thematic profiles are created that deal with the topics of folk folklore on a global level. Using the tools of digital platforms, these “forgotten” stories, songs, customs, myths, legends become the subject of wide-ranging communication and thus, creating a bridge of maintaining these forms over time, their reactualization, supplementing with new variants and creating a new way of transmitting the cultural and folklore heritage. “The web of connection between morality, temporality, technology and cultural production offers clues to the historical roots of the crisis faced by folklore” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 284).

Social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter are the largest resource of folklore and other characteristics of groups and peoples that are transmitted in the form of audio, video and written forms that create new, hybrid cultural scripts. The hashtag (#) as a tool creates a string model that connects various narratives of expression and a digital tool for transmitting folklore through time. In the same way, myths and legends are integrated into various video games that are part of the culture of new generations. Such an example is the Twitter initiative *#FolkloreThursday*, which grew into a global platform for connecting and sharing myths, stories, folklore, traditions from all countries of the world. The idea of Dee Dee Chainey and Witchy Winsham to nominate a day for sharing folklore facts, and a website filled with articles, created an innumerable cultural collection of different folklore genres and examples of the tradition of the peoples of the world. Using the hashtag *#FolkloreThursday*, this digital platform actually invites users (on Twitter, above all – but also on the Facebook page) to engage in a communication series of sharing various folklore and traditional artifacts, stories, customs, myths, legends, etc. Posts then initiate interaction among users about the topics and motifs that comprise these materials. This example confirms that the ubiquity and fluidity of these forms of expression in the digital world turn the contents of folklore into living, communicated and current material.

But also, due to the frequency of information, the use of these resources as a research resource is under the threat of false information, reshaping of the original forms, etc. New media are participatory and involve interaction that can often alter the intent or underlying, authentic content. In this type of communication, even with artifacts such as the traditional forms and contents of folklore, it takes the form of “network-based folk culture” (Howard 2008: 192).

### **The visual world of a digital folklore story – “Never Alone”**

Gaming, or the culture of playing video games, in a contemporary context is a trend that is part of digital communication. The contents on which these digital creative products are based are often based on the past and folk literature and folklore in general. Ancient myths, Norse legends have long been the basis of the stories on which famous video games are based. Those familiar with gaming as a culture know the fact that video games can also be an educational resource for the motifs and characters that are recognizable throughout folk literature.

It should be taken into account that there is no single gaming culture, because the concept, content and role of the player in each video game is different. What is universal is that “video games and their culture can help us understand aspects of social life such as work, education, culture, agency, power, experience, empathy, and identity in today’s world” (Muriel & Crawford 2018: 18).

Every video game is an educational resource at the same time. Regardless of whether the emphasis is placed on the content or the concept of the game, these digital products encourage the development of opinion (critical and creative), communication (play in a team, in interaction) and, in particular, geographical, historical, social, cultural, mythological, folklore and other types of concepts and facts. Video games can even enhance traditional culture and strengthen cultural identity. There are a number of examples that show that video games are simultaneously a cultural introduction of the folklore of nations and countries. So, for example there are several famous video games created based on the spiritual and material wealth of China: “Journey to the West-Monkey King”, “King Gesar”, “The Legend of Sword Man”.

One such example is the video game “Never Alone” (orig. “Kisima Ingitchuna”), which was created based on the folklore and tradition of the indigenous population in Alaska – the Inupiaq community.

The story of the life of the Inupiaq people and their philosophy of living in a state of well-being is the basis of this video game. Following the protagonist, the little girl Nuna, and her epic journey through the challenges, players actually get to know the collective identity of the Inupiat community, their customs, artifacts, cultural markers. The video game reconstructs and reinterprets (through the involvement of the players) the authentic story of this minority. Alaska is home to about 13,500 Inupiaq of whom about 3,000, mostly over age 40, speak the language (North Alaskan Iñupiaq dialect).

Through the choice of the game’s protagonist (Nuna) and the obstacles she has to overcome to find the source of the blizzard, this video game fully presents the culture and folklore of the “little people” of Alaska. Throughout the game, the main character is guided by the traditional values of this

community, their culture, objects, customs, etc. On Nuna's journey, she is followed by a spiritual guide or spirit helper – Sila, which is also a traditional symbol of this culture. Parts of the game also show “scrimshaw” – the art of storytelling through drawing, then “caribou” – the clothes, the objects they often use for hunting (“bola”), coexistence with animals (especially the polar fox, which is a companion on the road).

The player's role is to help Nuna on her epic journey through eight chapters. The player actually solves the puzzles through her to reach the goal. The central plot revolves around discovering the source of the blizzard that devastated Nuna's village and restoring balance to nature.

Balance in nature is a physical, social and spiritual driver of Iñupiaq community members. The content of this video game shares the traditional way of life of this group, whose basic wisdom is based on the personal and collective relationship between people, nature and animals. Their worldview teaches how to create a society that does no harm to the world, a way of life with values of love and respect for nature, for others and for older generations. Values based on sharing (from food to spirituality, songs, dance), connection to the field. Simply, fundamental values of life.

What does this show?

The video game “Never Alone” confirms that these digital products are a perfect bridge between generations, a fusion of past and present, history, people and traditions. It is amazing how a narrative through the framework of visualization and technological tools can overcome the generation gap, and more importantly – confront the youngest generation with learning about others, about the needs of the community, about the eternal struggle between good and evil. Video games based on folklore stories are the most authentic resource for learning about other cultures and peoples, mythological elements, legends, etc. This is a transformation from historical knowledge and creates modern learning approaches for the new generation.

On the other hand, this is the only way to respond to the threat of technology and the dominance of global cultures. Humanity has a moral responsibility to preserve the small invisible cultures, because they create the mosaic of the world's diversity.

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## ФОЛКЛОРОТ И ТРАДИЦИЈАТА НИЗ ИЗРАЗНИТЕ ФОРМИ НА ДИГИТАЛНИТЕ МЕДИУМИ

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### Резиме

Развојот на технолошките, на дигиталните и на комуникациските уреди создава потреба од целосно редефинирање на начинот на кој културното наследство, фолклорот и традицијата се пренесуваат во дигитални изразни форми. Виртуелната реалност и алатките за вештачка интелигенција го пренесуваат физичкото постоење во реално време и на тој начин го трансформираат пристапот до целокупниот човечки капитал и до културното наследство. Ова е трансформација од историско знаење и создава модерни пристапи за истражување и едукација на новата генерација, преку интерактивни форми (поткасти, видеоигри, тематски профили на Фејсбук, Твитер и Инстаграм).