



StoryCode is an open-source, global community for emerging and established cross-platform and immersive storytellers.

## The StoryCode Ten: Questions for Loc Dao and Hugues Sweeney

The StoryCode Ten is a short-form quarterly interview series that examines how leading cross-platform and immersive media storytellers around the globe are defining the medium.



Loc Dao



Hugues Sweeney Photo by Simon Duhamel

### Loc Dao

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*Interview by Hal Siegel*

The National Film Board of Canada is one of world's the leading producers of immersive and cross-media documentaries. Loc Dao and Hugues Sweeney give an in-depth look into the process behind their award-winning projects *A Journal of Insomnia* and *Bear 71* and discuss the past and future of the NFB as well as its role in the global media ecosystem.





Let's start with two of your recent projects: *Bear 71* and *A Journal of Insomnia*. In each case, is it possible to separate the story from the technology?

Loc:

Not in our work. The technology is part of the work. It's interesting in that *Bear* and *Insomnia* share certain technological characteristics: multi-user audiences, web-cams, installations that interact with the content, but ultimately each is a very different way of telling a story.

Hugues:

Each project is a blank canvas. This has been the NFB's DNA for almost seventy-five years: there is no format, there is no series or recipe, there is no repetition. If you go back to the birth of cinéma vérité — direct cinema — it's about syncing sound to film. And when you read the discussions around the first direct cinema films, they are talking about the camera and the sound as "reality sensors" and "reality captors". That was in 1950. So what does a web cam mean today? What does a GPS mean today? What does a brain

was in 1959. So what does a web-cam mean today? What does a GPS mean today? What does a brain sensor mean today?

So it's in pure continuity with how technology has been formed, reformed and hijacked through the years, and more specifically, at certain points of revolution in the genre. So I'm also curious to see in the attributes of one technology how it can tell a story, and does it fit with a subject. It's really about fitting form and content together — for example, with *Insomnia* you received a phone call in the middle of the night, and you need to give away part of your night to experience it. That's part of it, and you don't do that with film, you don't receive a phone call to go into the movie theater.

Loc:

I think technology has been a hindrance, and as it improves, our ability to tell stories improves. Our goal is always to be transparent, but telling a story with a keyboard and a mouse — that era is coming to an end soon. I don't know how long telling stories with touch will last either. And as we enter an era of more natural computing, I hope that storytelling becomes as natural as us having a conversation without worrying about what's in-between.

**Do your projects ever start with a technology? Do you ever say "Oh this would be a fascinating technology to explore."? Or does it always start with a story first, and then figuring out what technology fits?**

Hugues:

I don't know. For instance, the *Barcode* project asks the question "What do objects say about us?" So you scan the barcode and the object tells you a story through a one minute video. In the genesis of the project, I'm not sure which came first — was it about the fascination of "What can a barcode say?" because that is pure technology, it's a camera and access to a database. Or was it a more anthropological look at what objects say about us? Did it come from the object or the technology? I think it depends on the project.

Loc:

It does. It depends on the project and the form. We have a form that we are comfortable with — we come from documentary, from a narrative background. Therefore, interactive documentaries started from stories, from strong writing. But as we explore *Barcode*, as we explore *Insomnia*, as we explore [the upcoming project] *Circa 1948*, it's no longer the backbone anymore. There is no backbone script on *Barcode* or on *Circa 1948*.

Hugues:

For instance, the *Insomnia* project really came from me staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night, being awake, and thinking: "how many people in my time-zone right now are also doing this?", and at the same time, because my job is digital production, I thought that the internet could be the best media to tell that story because the internet is like insomnia, it never sleeps, and it can interconnect solitude. So, which came first? I don't know. But it's finding that matching point between content and its shape in terms of technology. That's the privilege of working at the NFB — it's the NFB standard to rethink the form for every project.

**As part of your process at the NFB, you've said that you do week-long prototyping, instead of stretching things out over longer periods. Tell me more about that.**

Loc:

The process that we use is the combination of a film process plus a web development process with the editorial filter of a journalistic approach. Films can take a long time to make — sometimes painfully long, especially for those who come from the web or the media, and who are used to one day turn-arounds. So one thing that we brought over from the web/gaming world is this week long prototyping that we call "digi-labing". It's like taking that sprint process from agile software development and putting it in one week, and defining our goals and milestones for that one week. By the end of it, we actually end up with a prototype,

user scenarios and documents. Now, they don't always hit the mark, but we are able to compress probably three to six months of production into a compressed work week.

### **And you will do a digi-lab for each project?**

Loc:

Not always, but when there is something new. The forms that we are already comfortable with are part of everyday production. But for instance we are doing a few labs around the big data project that we are working on. because for that we are bringing together the Film 4 people from the U.K., partners from the U.S. and our team. And the project itself, the whole storyworld, is quite complicated with emerging narrative for VOD and broadcast, and then an interactive documentary, an installation and a real-world game. So we need a lab to bring that all together.

### **Once you have the prototype, how is it evaluated? Do you do user testing against it?**

Loc:

It's group evaluated. We'll bring in a larger group of people and do some user testing and feedback. Hugues and I and some of the other people on our team are industry veterans, so I consider ourselves "uber-testers": we have our ways of gauging and measuring, and we need to see certain things that are pretty standard in the web industry. But because our projects experiment, we've added the prototype in to the traditional wireframes and designs so we can answer whether this application of technology will really help the story or will it just blow up when you try it.

Hugues:

For the *Insomnia* project, we launched phase one, which was collecting confessions from the insomniacs. So on the one hand, the public started to be part of the process as creators but also as an audience with the artists — it was live in some ways, but we were also still creating it. The four artists were looking at the content and reactions that were coming in everyday, and it changed their point of view of the project.

So now I'm trying to think more and more about how participatory media can really mean in the process of creating an interactive documentary, and how do we involve the public. Very often with participatory media, there is a cold, arms-length kind of relationship between the creator and the audience. So, in the production process, how do we go live and have people create all along.

We are doing this with a skateboard project right now. We are remaking a classic 1965 skateboard film, and we are having skateboard communities from all over the world create their own versions. But the project is not out yet. We are going to collect all of this and make an interactive interface for it. So, is this prototyping? Yes and no.

For us it's a real challenge as an institution, because for seventy-five years we have been doing a master tape and handing it out to a festival, and then it would go to tv or a dvd. But now, while we are still in the production process, we go live.

Loc:

That's one of the shifts that we are working to change in the film industry, starting with our own organization. Now, a project is live from nearly when we conceive it. It's no longer make it and then launch it.

### **This new idea that a project is live almost from its conception — is that driven because it's now participatory? or does it extend beyond?**

Loc:

It's both. It's because of the nature of the internet and the nature of the ongoing relationship we need to have with our audience. I think it has to be an ongoing relationship, building around each of the categories by

with our audience. I think it has to be an ongoing relationship, building around each of the categories by which we program our content, and by having those audiences be interested in what we do on the environment, on technology, or on healthcare. They come to know us as a brand around those subjects, as opposed to "oh it's that same company that launched that film two years ago."

Hugues:

From the filmmaking point of view, that industry never went "live". We come from a radio and an internet background, so the live aspect is very interesting — how do you inject a live aspect into documentary? Documentary has never been live, except maybe for performance, or happenings, or installations. But with these interactive things, we are live all the time, we are connected, so what does it mean for documentary to do that? I think we are just starting to scratch the surface.

**In terms of participatory media, a year or two ago it was all very novel. Now, it is becoming a very common "ask" — a lot of projects are asking for people's stories, and as a result it seems like it will be even harder to get people to do it. Have you encountered this yet?**

Hugues:

For me, the big takeaways from *Insomnia* are first: be relevant. It is a very basic value, but if you want people to have a feeling of engagement, then be relevant about something. The second thing is: be specific about what you ask them to do. Almost like a how a director would conduct his actors. You need to understand the role they are playing in the overall piece — it's not just an open box.

The third thing that I started to realize with the *Insomnia* installation is that, because the it's like a black box (you go inside and you answer *Insomnia's* questions, and your answers are projected on the outside for others to see), a public gathers, and what I realized is that it's not an installation — it's a performance, and the performer is the public.

Loc:

That's right. I think *Insomnia's* extension of user-generated content (UGC) into the installation space hasn't been done that much and I think that interconnecting an installation with an internet project and working on that two way communication is an area that has a lot to be explored.

I've worked on a lot of UGC projects over the years and I would say that most of them are failures. And that's ok — we like to experiment and fail. but the reason that they fail is that they are not relevant to your day, your time, your life. But for instance, with our project *The Test Tube of David Suzuki*, we started by saying "We know you are busy, but if you had an extra minute, what would you do?" A very simple, pointed question. And we had over one hundred twenty thousand submissions. It was a simple ask, a sharp ask, and we did user test the hell out of it. We have enough experience to know immediately what's going to fail and then after that we are still very, very critical because you know that you only have one shot. You have that first fifteen seconds when the site loads, and then you have that question, and if it's not there, then they are gone.

Hugues:

UGC needs to bring something to the subject. Or else just do a really good navigation, and it will work. For *Insomnia* I wanted it to be told by the insomniacs, not by the experts, so ok, we need UGC. But for some other subjects we don't need UGC. Right now it's almost dogma, an ephemeral dogma. Because people can contribute, it's like you have to contribute. We are having a lot of discussions internally about "oh, this is very interactive" because people created the videos. But why? Maybe you should just move the mouse and it's very interactive because it means something.

**Your projects cover such a wide range of stories and topics. What kind of impact or resonance do you want them to have?**

Loc:

For each project we define goals — some projects have a goal of social impact, some have goals of awareness and some have goals of reaching a wider audience. But it also depends on geography. We have primary and secondary audiences; for *Bear 71* we wanted the larger audience to be international, worldwide. But equally important was reaching environmentalists, the filmmaking community, artists and people who love the outdoors. For social impact, the goal was to influence the thinking and the policy around the management of animals in that area.

Hugues:

I see our projects as conversation starters. We did one on sound pollution called *Sound Ecology*. It was covered on a science radio show, and on the show they mentioned that the NFB had just launched this project, they gave a quick summary of it and then asked to their audience "What is sound pollution today? What is sound ecology?" and from a science point of view they attacked that issue. So how can these project be put in the center of the table, and the discussion and debate starts around the table, made by media or conferences or whatever.

For instance, the *Insomnia* project is about the frontier between the natural, the human, the virtual, the fact that we are invaded by technology and that we are located everywhere we go.

**Interactive projects present a new set of issues in regards to their lifecycles — they are potentially online forever. How does you plan on handling this challenge?**

Hugues:

I think technology shifts will kill them. If you look at the stuff we did with Shockwave at the end of the 1990's, they don't work anymore. Everything I did with CD-Roms, if I don't have my Mac G3 — and I don't have it anymore — I can't play these things. So that's problematic. We are already talking about the death of the cursor, and that means the death of almost all my projects. So what are we going to do about that? And that's another issue we are tackling at the NFB: "How do we archive these things?" It's not just screengrabs and video grabs. Should we archive the internet and one user or something? It's a real issue, and we have to archive everything.

Loc:

It becomes a funny joke: "We'll just grab the servers and throw them in the vault." But what happens if Twitter goes down? Which projects die? What happens if Facebook goes down, or Google? We don't have the answer yet. But until the technology shifts, I don't think the projects do have a lifecycle. All our projects still have lots of traffic and because the issues are still relevant, they are not going to lose that traffic.

**Douglas Rushkoff's new book "*Present Shock*" is about our incapacity to handle all this "nowness" — all of these feeds of information from things like Facebook and Twitter. As your roles as producers, is it possible to react against this with digital storytelling? Or is digital media by its nature just this onslaught of information?**

Loc:

I think there are a couple of answers to that. The NFB is about socially relevant audio-visual storytelling. But we are also about this rich heritage of documentary and animation that is not the mainstream — that really is a counter to the mainstream. Our films are not anything that Hollywood ever did or would ever do. And in that same way there is a parallel to our interactive works. *Bear 71* is a criticism of our digital age, a cry for us to self-examine our use of technology. But we use the technology to criticize itself. We are all in this digital age and we use the technology heavily, but we should all stop and question what we are doing.

Hugues:

Maybe the answer is in the frenzy, the sense that information gets shorter and shorter and gets repeated more and more. The same sentences, the same information. It just closes the place for perspective and reflection. But people want to take some time, have perspective, take a step back and understand what is

going on. I am seeing this as a real opportunity to be a place or a presence where this happens. And I think there is a large audience for this. People want to find meaningfulness in media. We are giving the artist the context to explore within this frenzy environment. We add another layer on top of it.

When you look at the demographics of media, people in their twenties are connected over 95%. That's where their entertainment and culture happens, so we need to be there, we need to go there and address this.

Loc:

(Laughing)

Yeah, if you can't reach the audience on the platforms they are on, then you are talking to no one.

Projects:

*A Journal of Insomnia*

*Bear 71*

*Barcode*

*The Test Tube of David Suzuki*

*Sound Ecology*

**Hal Siegel** is a partner at **Murmur**, a hybrid studio/technology company that pioneers new forms of immersive, cinematic experiences.

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