# The Autistic Me, Produced Digitally: Experienced Responses to Digital Storytelling

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After presenting this project at Computers & Writing 2024, the author departed higher education for a position in local government. Remaining in higher education became untenable for his physical and emotional health. This personal narrative explores the tension between the public advocacy of digital Autistic self-identity and the embedded values of some academic departments. The narrative opens with an explanation for the author's exit from higher education, framing the author's academic journey as difficult and ultimately futile. His path took him from student to educator to "AltAc" (Alternative Academic), and along the way, he experienced troubling responses to his online identity as an Autistic person. The author highlights obstacles he encountered as an Autistic self-advocate engaged in digital storytelling. On X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms, self-advocates have adopted hashtags, notably "#ActuallyAutistic" and "#AutisticsInAcademia," identifying publicly as Autistics within higher education. The need to preemptively label oneself "actually" Autistic reflects the frequent dismissals and often aggressive attacks Autistics experience in online spaces. This narrative describes the physical, emotional, and career tolls the author endured, at least in part, for self-advocacy through a digital Autistic self-identity.

## Leaving Higher Education

I intended to spend the 2024–25 academic year designing a project on Neurodiverse self-identity and digital authoring. As a foundational project, I proposed conversing with Autistic content creators, listening to their stories, and reviewing the similarities in our collective experiences as digital storytellers. Significant differences among Autistic authors might also be affirmed. As M. Remi Yergeau observed, "While new media scholars bemoan the death of the blog, the autistic blogosphere thrives" (2018, p. 23). The Neurodiverse blogosphere merits scholarly exploration.

There is a rich trove of material authored or coauthored by Neurodiverse writers, including an expanding body of self-published works. As a blogger and podcaster, my inbox is filled with a steady stream of requests for me to

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review books and interview authors. There is also a body of work addressing Autistic writers. These range from attempts to diagnose long-deceased writers, such as Julie Brown's *Writers on the Spectrum: How Autism and Asperger Syndrome Have Influenced Literary Writing* (2010), to efforts to dismiss the Autistics as incapable of reflective self-expression, notably Francesca Happé's 1991 paper on Autistic autobiographies, which I critiqued in my dissertation (Wyatt, 2010). Focusing on digital storytelling would allow me to craft an autoethnographic project critiquing existing scholarship when appropriate, especially challenges to rhetorical agency (Yergeau, 2018).

However, my physical and emotional health suffered while working as a full-time lecturer at a flagship state research university. My online identity as a digital storyteller suffered, too, with only ten blog posts and eight podcast episodes released during the 2023–24 academic year. The brief blog posts addressed exhaustion and burnout. I was on edge, shaking and trembling as I forced myself through sensory and social overload on campus. Lacking time to express myself as *The Autistic Me* increased my isolation and anxiety. I clung to my identity as a university instructor while my body rebelled. My doctor told me that my working conditions had to change.

In late July, I presented a letter from my physician to human resources seeking accommodations. For the fall, I had been assigned a Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule, teaching back-to-back courses in three different rooms on different floors of the same building. The doctor recommended a Tuesday-Thursday teaching schedule and a single-room assignment. In response to the letter, HR requested that I complete a Family and Medical Leave Act form. There was no offer to compromise. Previous experiences taught me that such requests do not end with accommodations. A settlement with another university prevents me from discussing these experiences in detail. Some stories cannot be told.

Two days before I had to either accept or reject a reappointment at the university, I received an offer for a position in local government as a digital media specialist. The communications team manager explained that *The Autistic Me* influenced the hiring decision. The city wanted someone familiar with communicating complex concepts to a non-technical audience. I now work with several Neurodiverse colleagues, creating digital content. These colleagues encourage me to create new content for *The Autistic Me*. I found a place where my identity and my creative interests are valued.

## Writing, Technology, and Identity

Despite struggling with the physical act of writing and the mental process of decoding words, I declared myself a creative writer during second grade.

I wanted to craft compelling stories like the ones I saw on screens and local stages. A partially paralyzed right arm and palsy episodes make handwriting slow and painful. During those elementary years, I discovered the magic of typewriters. Then came computers. Apple and Atari computers sat unused in some classrooms. The word processors required memorizing unintuitive keystroke combinations, but I enjoyed the power of moving words and sentences on screen. I learned to program in junior high because there was no usable word processor for the Commodore VIC-20 my family had purchased. Decades later students and I would discuss how writing is technology, drawing from Denis Baron's *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution* (2009).

Growing up in the 8-bit era of Apple, Atari, Commodore, and Tandy computers, I taught myself computer programming and applied the skills I gained to writing, designing, and publishing content. While others were interested in creating video games, I learned to design digital typefaces and how to control printer output. By high school, my refuge was the journalism and yearbook classroom, where I maintained the new IBM PCs and connected them to an Apple LaserWriter printer. I coded a text editor, which the publication staff used to compose newspaper and yearbook stories.

In the 1980s, I began exploring virtual spaces, where I felt more comfortable than in classrooms. Accommodation goes beyond designing for physical differences. As Sarah Parsloe's 2015 analysis of 561 discussion posts on "Aspie Central" (AC) found, computer-mediated communication (CMC), accommodates various traits common among Autistics and other Neurodiverse individuals. The benefits of text-based communication for Autistics include that it "avoids nonverbal cues that are difficult for people with ASDs to process" (p. 340).

Asperger's Syndrome was christened "The Geek Syndrome" by *Wired* magazine reporter Steve Silberman (2001). As Silberman later noted, we gathered online in our *Neurotribes* (2015). The exhaustion of decoding vocal tones, facial expressions, body language, and social cues no longer drove us from interacting with others. We still experienced some frustration, and synchronous chats proved more difficult than asynchronous discussion threads.

Scattered geographically and isolated socially in physical spaces, we located others online with whom we shared traits and preferences that others labeled "odd." We shared complaints about how unclear most people are, with their tendency to hint and suggest instead of simply telling us what is expected of us. We took turns mocking confusing idioms and aphorisms. We had been told throughout childhood and into adulthood to sit still, make eye contact, and pay attention—even while we were absorbing everything around us. We commiserated about loud noises, strong smells, uncomfortable clothes, and other sensory annoyances. We shared labels: lazy, works below potential, unfocused, and worse.

We shared our narratives, digitally constructing an even larger identity. We created an advocacy community without realizing it. The Internet expanded our community dramatically. Before the browser-based World Wide Web, the (mostly undiagnosed) Neurodiverse gathered in USENET newsgroups, Relay chat rooms, LISTSERV email lists, and FIDONET forums. A virtual version of me frequented those virtual spaces in the 1980s and 90s, joining CompuServe, America Online (AOL), and other dial-up services. During college, I used a mainframe account to access the Internet Relay Chat channels.

Online acquaintances shared stories of self-discovery and new labels: Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and Pervasive Developmental Disorder—Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Over time, some were relabeled with "Asperger's Syndrome" by doctors. These online friends embraced the identity of "Aspie." They also began to argue they didn't have a disorder or syndrome. They were simply Neurodiverse. As Sarah Parsloe observed, online Autistics "have worked to counteract the biomedical understanding of autism by exchanging it for the discourses of neurodiversity" (p. 337). In our stories, we are not flawed—we are part of human diversity.

This emerging online Autistic community would evolve into the broader Neurodiversity Movement. We faced some internal and external conflicts as debates raged about who was entitled to the various and changing labels (Parsloe, 2015; Silberman, 2015). Yet, in a text-based, self-selected online universe, the debates were contained to spaces few people visited—and many did not know existed. Autistics want to preserve our early history, including these early digital stories (Botha et al., 2024). The online forum "Wrong Planet," founded by Alex Plank, was named for the experience of Autistics: we were outsiders on a strange planet, like extraterrestrial anthropologists trying to decode human nature (Boyce, 2022). Plank has been a guest on my podcast, indicating the interconnected nature of the Autistic community.

Our online Neurotribes of the 1980s and 90s brought together people with similar traits and experiences. However, we were so similar that it limited our understanding of Neurodiversity. We were mostly young white males from middle-class households. Forty years later, young white males continue to be diagnosed more frequently with Autism than other demographic groups (Cruz et al., 2024).

I received formal diagnoses of ADHD and complex partial seizures in the late 1990s. I didn't consider myself disabled, though I have physical limitations from a complex birth: partial paralysis, Erb's palsy, and base membrane dystrophy. Without school as a focal point, my mind and body were beyond my control. I only felt well when I was at a computer keyboard. Feeling lost, I did what many of my Autistic friends have done: I returned to school where I could focus on writing stories.

## Graduate School Struggles

Researching autism was not my intention when I entered graduate school at 35. I sought an MFA in creative writing, filling my schedule with courses in film and theater alongside the required courses in composition and rhetoric. My stage plays have won awards and juried contests. Before returning to school, I had taken to stages at poetry jams and story nights. I changed my degree path from the MFA to an MA after a faculty member suggested that I focus on technology and writing to improve my chances on the job market. My thesis addressed how a learning management system (LMS) altered traditional student-teacher relationships in writing courses (Wyatt, 2006).

My wife and I moved to Minnesota in 2006, where the University of Minnesota had accepted me as a doctoral student in Rhetoric, Scientific and Technical Communication. Things did not go well. Apparent seizures increased, with shaking and palsy-like symptoms impossible to control. I experienced migraines weekly. I endured neurological tests, brain scans, and more. It was one test after another, alongside my efforts to remain in graduate school. In November 2006, I was referred to a neuropsychologist for a reevaluation of my ADHD and learning disabilities.

In December 2006, the neuropsychologist added the label “autistic” to my diagnoses. The DSM-IV-TR had been revised (American Psychiatric Association, 2000); many of us with other diagnoses were now gathered under the heading of “Autism Spectrum Disorder.” Now that I was officially Autistic, the program faculty suggested I adjust my research focus toward Autism.

To meet a project requirement for a digital composition course, I launched *The Autistic Me* on Blogger in 2007. Blog entries were posted without my name displayed. I planned to archive or delete the blog at the end of the course and made no effort to promote the blog. I assumed the story of how I came to be labeled Autistic would be of little or no interest to other people. By not completing Blogger’s online profile, I believed that my digital footprints and real identity were obscured. Had I written a book, someone would have had to locate the text in a store to read my thoughts. As a Google service, Blogger posts were given priority in search results. The more recent a resource, the more weight it receives in search algorithms. Those first few posts to *The Autistic Me* appeared at the top of searches, leading to significant traffic.

Many early readers of *The Autistic Me* were parents of Autistic children. Within less than two weeks of launching the blog, I began to receive aggressive emails. Some of the senders would be familiar to other autistic creators, "autism parents" who cling to a narrow and outdated concept of Autistic. My autism diagnosis was challenged, as were my lived experiences. The vitriol, which continues today, takes an emotional toll on many of the self-advocates I know. These were not the general attacks posted in communities; they were targeted and personal. My digital composition classmates did not respond to the blog for a couple of weeks. When a handful of peers finally did read *The Autistic Me*, there was a less aggressive, yet still skeptical, reaction to my disclosure. Their skepticism was disappointing.

Disclosure came with unanticipated consequences. Faculty began suggesting I focus my research on autism. Classmates expressed sympathy, as though I had contracted a fatal disease. Autism became the one and only aspect of my identity that seemed to matter within academia. These experiences were not unique. Edited collections including *Aquamarine Blue 5: Personal Stories of College Students with Autism* (Prince-Hughes, 2002), *Neurodiversity in Higher Education: Positive Responses to Specific Learning Differences* (Pollak, 2009), and *Scholars with Autism: Achieving Dreams* (Perner, 2012) were published as awareness of Neurodiversity among students (and faculty) increased.

Despite the negative emails from strangers and expressions of sympathy from classmates, I received far more positive feedback for my blog posts. Soon, I was being asked to share my stories in person. I spoke at school districts, regional conferences, and support group meetings. *The Autistic Me* had followers and subscribers, people who noticed when I posted—and when I didn't. When I had various medical emergencies and didn't post updates, I would return online to dozens of emails asking if I was well.

A handful of readers located my other blogs. My Blogger profile displays that I joined in 2004 and lists my other blogs that originated on Blogger. My primary blog was, and still is, *Poet Ponders the Digital*, a blog about technology and writing. From that blog, people discovered my name and were then able to locate my old USENET posts and other online artifacts. Some used the other blogs as further evidence that I could not be autistic since I had more than one interest.

When the digital composition course ended, I decided not to archive *The Autistic Me*. Readers, especially Autistics, wanted to learn from my experiences. Though my guidance to students would be to never write about negative experiences in school or the workplace, my blog became a coping mechanism for isolation and anger. I shared my medical challenges, especially those that might be connected to autism. When I faced an expulsion hearing for being perceived as "aggressive in tone and movement," I blogged about that, too. My Autistic traits were used against me by a respected scholar who still works in the field. Two other major figures in rhetoric critiqued my Autistic traits, likely not realizing how hurtful their observations were. Having a renowned professor tell me that I lacked the ability to understand complex theories led me to drop her course.

Yet, I found myself in agreement with these experts. How could I deny their wisdom? For assigned readings, I located sentences I understood and hoped the rest of the text supported those arguments. I memorized recurring phrases and repeated them to pass exams. I understand the complex technical aspects of digital media production, but decoding the language of rhetoric remains beyond my capacity decades later. I still cannot grasp theoretical works considered foundational within rhetoric. I envy Yergeau's ability to navigate the field of rhetoric while simultaneously calling out its traditions that exclude Autistics based on assumptions of what it means to be Autistic (2018, p. 36). To complete my coursework, I selected courses from other departments, such as advanced statistics—a topic I do understand.

I also adjusted my research plans and composed a dissertation that connected user interface/user experience design (UI/UX) to the experiences of Autistic students in online writing courses (Wyatt, 2010). By focusing on data from surveys and coded interviews, I avoided theoretical frameworks. The dissertation reflected an effort to please others.

A portion of my project relied on coding online forum posts. I felt guilty for conducting grant-funded research projects that relied on publicly accessible Autistic online communities. I had violated the trust of my community. Researchers should announce their presence in an online community, even if the forums are visible and accessible, without joining the space. I made no effort to convert my dissertation to a series of articles or a monograph. As I prepared to defend my dissertation, I entered the job market.

## Teaching while Autistic

To my surprise, members of several hiring committees were familiar with *The Autistic Me*. Some interview questions displayed ignorance and a lack of professionalism. I was asked how I could relate to students. Other questions were even more personal and inappropriate. I should have let go of the interview experiences. Instead, I blogged. I was not alone in experiencing microaggressions, as demonstrated by the chapters in *Disability and the Academic Job Market* (McGunnigle, 2022). Too often, disclosure leads to problematic assumptions, yet failing to disclose a disability can lead to conflicts in the workplace. Of course, I entered interviews having disclosed my differences.

In my first full-time university position, I succumbed to pressure to perform as an Autistic and agreed to an Autism-related research agenda—an analysis of public blogs composed by self-identified Autistics to identify features of "Autistic writing." After several attempts, I found myself unable to pursue the project. I began resenting assumptions about Autistics, pushing me away from the research. During my brief time on the tenure track, a colleague joked, "Autistics? We don't need no stinkin' Autistics." Supposedly a humorous nod to Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974), I knew I didn't belong. I taught at several other universities before accepting that I needed to take drastic action if I wanted to teach something other than first-year composition. I went back to school, of course.

I returned to creative writing and had several plays produced between 2014 and 2017. I found a supportive arts community and made friends with whom I remain in contact. We collaborated on theater and film projects. I shared these new adventures on the blog and podcast. In 2017, I finally completed a Master of Fine Arts in Film and Digital Technology. My thesis project was a documentary on typography within cinema (Wyatt, 2017). With the MFA in hand, I was determined to teach media production.

And yet, after obtaining the MFA, I ended up teaching first-year composition at two more universities. I brought media production into my course sections when possible. My students produced video essays and audio interviews. I encouraged students to consider academic papers as a special form of storytelling. I managed to present conference papers and publish articles on media creation. However, I felt isolated within the English departments in which I found myself.

## Through the Pandemic and Beyond

My students seemed more likely to locate *The Autistic Me* and ask questions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated online courses. Several students disclosed their own diagnoses or self-identities as Neurodiverse. In 2020, I began adopting the hashtags #ActuallyAutistic, #AutisticsInAcademia, and #AuADHD on social media. These hashtags also helped me locate other Autistics connected to higher education. They also proclaim to the doubters that I am a genuine, officially diagnosed, Autistic. "Listenership to *The Autistic Me* podcast quadrupled, and readership of the established blog nearly doubled. Posting more content to *The Autistic Me* blog during the pandemic attracted more readers and followers. The podcast shifted from a monthly to a bimonthly release schedule. In response to another creator's suggestion, I renamed the podcast *Perspectives on Neurodiversity* to reflect that it features conversations, not just monologues. The rebranding led to another increase in listenership and readers.

I received grateful emails and messages for discussing life as a Neurodiverse parent of two Neurodiverse daughters. My daughters joined the podcast, using pseudonyms, to discuss their Autism, anxiety, and ADHD. Following their episodes, I received praise and criticism. How dare we vaccinate children! How dare we keep them home when school resumes! How dare we do whatever it was we were not supposed to be doing. With a single post, podcast, or video, you can be exiled as a heretic. When I wrote and talked about the decision to seek medical support for my daughters, both of whom have severe ADHD, I received a flurry of negative responses from within the Neurodiversity community. Parenting choices are prone to controversy; the dilemmas faced by parents of Neurodiverse children seem uniquely fraught because we're often blamed for our children's differences.

## Concluding Thoughts

To my knowledge, none of my departmental colleagues maintained blogs or podcasts. One colleague noted that digital media are for the "mass market," accompanied by an observation that I invest a lot of time and energy in "less serious" writing: scripts, stories, essays, and online content. It seems ironic that a scholar of literature was critiquing my creative passions. I write thousands of words weekly, which I track compulsively, but few of those words target academic audiences. Digital storytelling connects me to people, especially other Neurodiverse creators facing skepticism regarding their identities and abilities. That seems as valuable as writing for academic readers. Our words matter greatly.

I appreciate that I never compartmentalized my personal life, teaching, and storytelling. I accepted conference invitations and honoraria to speak on Neurodiversity, aware that my academic credentials contributed to these opportunities. Those appearances led to media interviews and podcast appearances. My identity as an Autistic with a doctorate helped me reach parents, caregivers, and educators. I let people assume whatever they wished about my research.

Research from within the Neurodiverse community should be taken up by scholars willing to build on Remi Yergeau's autoethnographic work in rhetoric and the works of other Neurodiverse writers inside and outside higher education. Yergeau's 2018 work was followed by award-winning journalist Eric Garcia's 2021 *We're Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation*. Garcia deftly moves across the Autism spectrum and the spectrums of race, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual orientation. Public awareness of the diversity within the Neurodiversity movement is increasing, and so are opportunities for scholarly projects that engage in more complete conversations. Most of my Autistic friends identify with at least one additional, and often several, marginalized communities.

As the parent of two young Neurodiverse daughters encountering obstacles similar to those I met, I reconsidered my avoidance of research exploring

Autistic experiences. My daughters should not find suppressing—masking—their Neurodiverse traits necessary for social, academic, and professional success. Nor should educators expect them to limit their identities to Neurodiversity. Contributing to an evolving understanding of Neurodiversity would be the greatest legacy I can leave my daughters. Leaving higher education might change my audience, but not my purpose.

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