

# The Storyteller

Kevin Brooks, PhD '99, applies his craft to mesmerize audiences—and to help designers and engineers create better products.

By VIJAYSREE VENKATRAMAN

As the sun began to set on the longest day of the summer, Kevin Brooks, PhD '99, surveyed the small crowd that had gathered in a tiny Cambridge art gallery to hear him tell stories. A seasoned performer, he needed no microphone as he launched into a tale about starting classes to become a water safety instructor two years ago, not long after he turned 50. Standing by MIT's brightly lit Olympic-size pool, he'd been assailed by doubt. "With my orange earplugs, I felt like an alien trying to remember the strokes," he confessed. But he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his mother, who'd been a social worker, swimming teacher, and lifeguard at Philadelphia's mid-city YWCA.

Later, when he called his mother to tell her he'd been certified, she remarked vaguely, "Why, that's nice, dear." His first swim teacher had begun a slide into dementia. As Brooks wrapped up his story and the applause died down, a silver-haired gentleman in the audience said simply: "Now, *that* is storytelling."

By day, Brooks works at Motorola. After eight years as a user-interface researcher at the company, he's now a product manager. But his business card includes a second title, which he says comes closer to describing his job: technology storyteller. And telling stories—especially about technology—is a skill that he honed at the Institute.

In 1991, Brooks had quit a well-paying job at Apple to do research in the Interactive Cinema Division of the Media Lab, earning a

spot as a PhD candidate after a year as a technical instructor. For his thesis, he conceived and designed a software tool called Agent Stories to help authors create "metilinear" narratives: collections of small, related story pieces that can be arranged in many different ways to tell many different linear stories from different points of view. To keep the funding coming, he had to interest a diverse bunch of sponsors in this idea. "I told the story of my dissertation topic to bankers, engineers, Hollywood people, and the like," he says. "Every time a sponsor walked in, I had a ready-made audience."

Agent Stories gave users the power to request variations on what is, essentially, the same narrative. The story engine—an underlying set of algorithms—would help string the relevant pieces into a coherent whole. But before telling a computer how to do this, Brooks had to organize his own thoughts on the phenomenon of a protean story that could be steered this way and that. Midway through his doctoral program, he sat down to write a paper on this narrative form and found himself grappling with the concept. "I tried to 'intellect' my way through it—a common enough way at MIT," he says. To take a break, he began trying to revise a short story, but it suddenly seemed hopeless and he decided to call it a night. Then, on the radio that had been playing in the background, he heard an ad for "Sharing the Fire," an annual oral storytelling con-

ference, which would take place that year at Simmons College.

On a whim, he asked his advisor if he could attend; she agreed. Brooks got his first glimpse into the world of spoken-word performance. Watching the experts work their magic, he knew that he wanted to affect people the same way. He also found that the most electrifying performers let listeners participate. Storytelling, he realized, has three parts: the storyteller, the story, and the audience. Until then, he had been operating without that third component. If he cultivated the age-old craft, his research on computer-based narratives was bound to benefit as well.

The local storytelling community differed markedly from MIT. Most of the participants were women who already seemed to know each other; laughing, crying, and hugging were all par for the course. "I felt like a fish out of water," Brooks admits. Then he befriended a fellow attendee—a cardiologist who understood that by getting patients to talk about their daily lives, he could diagnose them more accurately than he could with only a series of clinical tests. Listening, it turns out, is a prerequisite for storytelling.

Brooks learned to structure his experiences into narratives that listeners could empathize with regardless of age, race, class, or gender. For his debut, he recounted his experience as a young black student from Philadelphia who'd arrived two weeks late for engineering school in upstate New York, only to discover that his allotted room was taken. After getting shunted around, he found himself knocking at the door of someone who had masterminded a series of room changes to avoid sharing space with an Orthodox Jewish student. Seeing Brooks, the bigot realized he could not have the room to himself after all, but he didn't talk to his roommate for three months. As his mother had told him, Brooks realized, he was going to college not only to get an education but also to give some people one.

Although Brooks found engineering school ruthlessly competitive, he discovered a flair for computers and creative writing. He trans-



Kevin Brooks performs at Out of the Blue Art Gallery in Cambridge.

ferred to Drexel University, where he majored in communications and studied programming languages as well. He then got a master's in film production from Stanford University.

Today, Brooks goes back and forth between engineers and designers, helping them collaborate to create interfaces that users will find intuitive. As a coder, he has the expertise to translate technical details for non-coders. Plus, he draws out engineers who get bogged down in hardware specifications and code constraints during the design process. He uses stories to open lines of communication.

To help engineers and designers think about how different kinds of people are likely to use a product, Brooks typically invents a fictional family, giving each character different tastes and interests. He then crafts a story that imagines how they might behave when using one of Motorola's products. "The stories allow us to predict, for example, how easily a character such as a tech-savvy 14-year-old-boy can set up our software, and how many choices a schoolteacher mom might

want to see in her movie list," says Allyson Beuhler, a manager of software solutions at Motorola. Imagining the characters' world helps engineers and designers focus on the most critical features.

"Many in the tech industry have the notion that when we develop a 'thing,' someone else will use it in exactly the way we want them to use it," Brooks says. "We all too often narrowly design products for people like ourselves." But he regards end users as his audience and works to include them in the story. He plays the role of user advocate, expressing his delight or frustration with a product early enough in the development process to make a difference.

Brooks, who has recorded a CD of stories (*The Kiss of Summer*) and coauthored a book (*Storytelling for User Experience: Crafting Stories for Better Design*), is convinced that storytelling could benefit many in the MIT community as well. Students tell stories when they give presentations asking for grant money or venture capital funds—or when they're

explaining to a professor why a P-set is late. Many launch headlong into a spiel without pausing to think, "What's my story?" You have to tell stories that leave listeners wanting to hear more, he says. "You have to make them ask you the questions you want them to ask."

For six years, Brooks has taught an Independent Activities Period course on the rudiments of storytelling. "Even the brightest MIT students don't necessarily know how to relate their personal experiences and passions to their academic work or how to communicate those thoughts to others who don't share their interests," he says. "And being listened to helps students move forward with their own intelligence and creativity."

The best storytellers find a doorway into the audience's lives and minds, enabling each listener to enter the story world, move around in it, see how it fits. That world, says Brooks, could be an enchanted forest, the neighborhood where you grew up, the space between subatomic particles—or maybe even a swimming pool. ■