The Science and Art of Storytelling

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Storytelling

• Storytelling is pervasive part of the human experience
  – Books, movies, computer games, training scenarios, education, every-day communication, etc.

• Narrative is a fundamental means by which we organize, understand, and explain the world

• Can you be a more effective communicator by being an effective storyteller?
A bit of background
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- I am a computer scientist
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• I study artificial intelligence
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• The strong story hypothesis
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- Instill computational systems with the ability to craft and tell novel stories in order to be better entertainers, educators, trainers, communicators, and, generally more capable of relating to humans
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Story generation
There is a woman named Jasmine. There is a king named Jafar. This is a story about how King Jafar becomes married to Jasmine. There is a magic genie. This is also a story about how the genie dies.

There is a magic lamp. There is a dragon. The dragon has the magic lamp. The genie is confined within the magic lamp.

King Jafar is not married. Jasmine is very beautiful. King Jafar sees Jasmine and instantly falls in love with her. King Jafar wants to marry Jasmine. There is a brave knight named Aladdin. Aladdin is loyal to the death to King Jafar. King Jafar orders Aladdin to get the magic lamp for him. Aladdin wants King Jafar to have the magic lamp. Aladdin travels from the castle to the mountains. Aladdin slays the dragon. The dragon is dead. Aladdin takes the magic lamp from the dead body of the dragon. Aladdin travels from the mountains to the castle. Aladdin hands the magic lamp to King Jafar. The genie is in the magic lamp. King Jafar rubs the magic lamp and summons the genie out of it. The genie is not confined within the magic lamp. King Jafar controls the genie with the magic lamp. King Jafar uses the magic lamp to command the genie to make Jasmine love him. The genie wants Jasmine to be in love with King Jafar. The genie casts a spell on Jasmine making her fall in love with King Jafar. Jasmine is madly in love with King Jafar. Jasmine wants to marry King Jafar. The genie has a frightening appearance. The genie appears threatening to Aladdin. Aladdin wants the genie to die. Aladdin slays the genie. King Jafar and Jasmine wed in an extravagant ceremony.

The genie is dead. King Jafar and Jasmine are married. The end.
Interactive narrative

A form of digital entertainment in which the player influences a dramatic storyline through actions.
Interactive narrative

You're taking customers away from me, Hassan!

Leave me alone, Saleh!
Cinematic reasoning
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Definitions
Narrative
The recounting of a temporally ordered sequence of events with a continuous subject and constitutes a whole

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Definitions

Story
A narrative that breaches canonicity
Reading/watching a story is an active process

- Reconstruct themes/plot
- Infer character drives
- Problem solve on behalf of characters
- Predict the future
- Etc.
Transportation

- Someone is transported...
  - As a result of performing certain mental actions
  - Goes some distance away from the origin world
  - Some aspects of origin world become inaccessible
  - Traveler returns, possibly changed
Verisimilitude

* Green and Brock 2000
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science

art
Beginning: 
- Everything you need to know about the “rules” of the fictional world

Middle: 
- Once upon a time there was ___.
  Every day, ___. One day ___.
  Because of that, ___. Because of that, ___.
  Until finally ___.

End: 
- Wrap up all the lose ends
Dramatic arc

Exposition
Inciting incident
Rising action
Climax
Falling action
Resolution
Denouement

Tension

Time
Disparities of knowledge

• Storytelling is not possible when all characters are omniscient

• Asymmetry of knowledge is required

• Suspense: you > protagonist

• Surprise: protagonist > you
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Time travel

• Events happen in chronological order

• Narratives don’t need to be told in chronological order

• Flashback

• Flash forward
Setting Expectations

• Audience isn’t just modeling character, they also model the (implied) author

• We have knowledge of familiar patterns and tropes

• Foreshadowing

• Checkhov’s gun
Don’t tell... show
Pixar rules of storytelling

Emma Coats (@lawnrocket)

YOU ADMIRE A CHARACTER FOR TRYING MORE THAN FOR THEIR SUCCESSES.
WHAT IS YOUR CHARACTER GOOD AT, COMFORTABLE WITH?

THROW THE POLAR OPPOSITE AT THEM.
CHALLENGE THEM.
HOW DO THEY DEAL?

Emma Coats (@lawnrocket)

WHAT ARE THE STAKES?
GIVE US A REASON TO ROOT FOR THE CHARACTER.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THEY DON’T SUCCEED?

Emma Coats (@lawnrocket)
GIVE YOUR CHARACTERS OPINIONS.

PASSIVE AND MALLEABLE MIGHT SEEM LIKEABLE AS YOU WRITE, BUT IT'S POISON TO THE AUDIENCE.

PIE IS SUPER YUMMY!
Simplify.
Focus.
Combine Characters.

You’ll feel like you’re losing valuable stuff
but it sets you free.

Emma Coats (@lawnrocket)

YOU GOTTA IDENTIFY WITH YOUR CHARACTERS.
WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU ACT THAT WAY?

YOU CAN’T JUST WRITE ‘COOL’.

Emma Coats (@lawnrocket)
COINCIDENCES
TO GET CHARACTERS INTO TROUBLE ARE GREAT.

A COINCIDENCE TO GET THEM OUT OF TROUBLE IS
CHEATING.
YOU GOTTA KEEP IN MIND WHAT’S INTERESTING TO YOU AS AN AUDIENCE, NOT WHAT’S FUN TO DO AS A WRITER.

THEM CAN BE VERY DIFFERENT.

Emma Coats (@lawnrocket)

Trying for theme is important,

But you won't see what the story is actually about until you're at the end of it.

Emma Coats (@lawnrocket)
DISCOUNT THE FIRST THING THAT COMES TO MIND.
AND THE SECOND, THIRD, FOURTH, FIFTH --
GET THE OBVIOUS OUT OF THE WAY.

SURPRISE YOURSELF.

Emma Coats (@lawnrocket)
WHEN YOU’RE STUCK
MAKE A LIST OF WHAT WOULDN’T HAPPEN NEXT.

LOTS OF TIMES THE MATERIAL TO GET YOU UNSTUCK WILL SHOW UP.

Emma Coats (@lawnrocket)
FINISH YOUR STORY.
LET IT GO EVEN IF IT’S NOT PERFECT.
IN AN IDEAL WORLD YOU HAVE BOTH, BUT MOVE ON.
DO BETTER NEXT TIME.
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