# The Difference between Narrative and Story

Tod Foley, 2015

The words "Narrative" and "Story" are often used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous.

A **Narrative** is a set of event-types and ideas, typically related and selected for thematic purposes but not necessarily sequential nor dramatic. It is open-ended. Narratives involve theme, order, word choice and emphasis, but exist without any need for Plot. A Narrative does not need a Structure; it just *is*. Entire cultures can (and do) tell themselves Narratives. The Theory of Evolution is a Narrative. "Land of the Free, Home of the Brave" is a Narrative. A Narrative functions as both a *Template* by which Stories are interpreted, and as a *Filter* determining which Stories will be accepted and which will be rejected or denied by adherents of that particular Narrative.

A **Story** is more directly tied to the concept of *Plot* and *Character*. It is a set of events with a Beginning, Middle and End, selected and arranged so as to convey a particular Meaning and/or Point of View. A Story, when it "works" (i.e. in a manner many people find acceptably resonant with one Narrative Structure or another) is the manifestation of a Narrative, in such a way as to support or refute it.
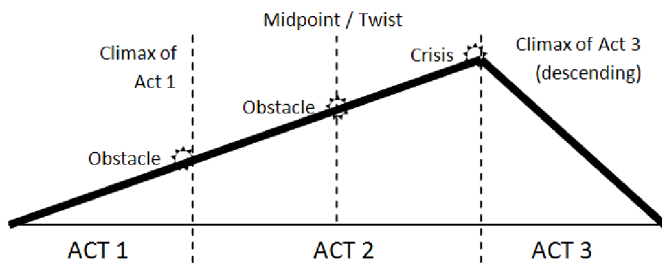
A **Narrative Structure** (like that shown in the image above) is the *shape* and *purpose* of a Story, absent the mundane, non-archetypal details. A Narrative Structure can be emergent, but if it's done right, what it emerges "into" is an already-existing (because archetypal) Narrative Structure, in either its positive (affirming) or negative (denying) form. To make matters slightly more confusing, a Story's Structure is called a "Narrative Structure" when we are speaking of the *framework* or *formula* rather than the *content*. That's because we're looking at a template. Joseph Campbell's famous "monomyth" is a Narrative Structure. So is Aristotle's dramatic arc.

# # #

These are the differences between *Story*, *Narrative*, and *Narrative Structure*. A Narrative Structure is the shape and purpose of a Story, absent the mundane, non-archetypal details. As for "Narrative" vs "Story", some banal but substantiating links I found were http://www.differencebetween.com/difference-between-narrative-and-vs-story and http://www.ehow.com/info_10038404_difference-between-narrative-story.html

But for my money (and politics aside), the most interesting one by far was http://csc.asu.edu/2013/03/21/the-difference-between-story-and-narrative/ which is a response to the following lecture by John Hagel: http://www.youtube.com/embed/JtACgifrV4g

Excerpt: "Hagel's formulation has the broad social narratives at the highest level—what we would label **master narratives**, which endure over time and are broadly known by members of a culture—and **personal narratives** at the lowest level. The step he is missing is what we have called **local narratives**: systems of stories about events in the here-and-now. Local narratives *ground* master narratives in contemporary events and define a place where individuals can cast themselves in roles, aligning their personal narratives. This creates *vertical integration*, where all three levels are aligned, and it makes for an extraordinary persuasive package."

(You had me at "Persuasive Package".)

A "story" has the typical definition here: a retelling of events in the shape of an arc with a beginning, middle and end. But a "narrative" in this sense is a connected network of stories and statements (which Hagel intriguingly calls "unfinished stories") which provides a sense of identity or purpose to a social group or a whole society. The idea that a Narrative includes "unfinished stories" as well as finished stories really drives home the important distinction here. So in this sense... "George Washington and the Cherry Tree" is a (probably apocryphal) *Story* that supports a *Narrative* of "Americans Value Honesty". "Saddam Hussein has WMDs" was a (false) *Story* that supported an "America Is Always Right" *Narrative.*

# # #

Another intriguing statement was the idea that a Narrative is open-ended. Because of this, it invites participation. (Or play!) In practice (or play), your participation (your Story) may end up either supporting or refuting the Narrative.

But this goes both ways: the Narrative may support or refute your Story as well! For instance, You may take part in a covert mission in the war, but the government denies any knowledge of your mission, and after the war is over no one supports or believes your story. Your *story* has a beginning middle and end, but it will be refuted by the official *Narrative* (public perception via media) of the war.

# # #

A Local Narrative brings a tactical level to a Master Narrative.

I see Local Narratives as fractal (local) manifestations of Master Narratives, which is perhaps why Hagel did not mention them. For instance, within the *Master Narrative* that says "There exist powerful and monstrous creatures spawned by evil which torment man and deserve to be slain", we might have a *Local Narrative* that says "The evil Gazoo of the Tulgey Woods eats farm animals and terrorizes the children. We are at its mercy, and must make sacrifices to appease it. One day we will be delivered from its tyranny by a mighty hero."

But *Personal Narratives* are qualitatively different. These are statements that individuals or groups tell themselves about themselves. In this category go many of the trappings of RPG Character Development, such as Aspects, Goals, even Character Classes, etc. Statements that say "I am a _ that does _." "I am a Watchdog of God who fights the evil in mens hearts""I am a warrior prince destined for the throne""I am a superhero who struggles with a personal life"etc.

Little by little, one by one, all Narratives wish to be substantiated by Stories. In fact, I think that's what happens when a Personal Narrative comes up against (collides with?) a Local Narrative, and *the veracity of both are tested.*

Now.

In RPGs (unlike descended myths), not all sessions are successful - i.e. not all stories support the narrative - because it is possible for a PC to fail, and/or the narrative to turn out to be wrong.

But those aren't the games players really want, are they!?

At least in western culture, we like for our heroes to succeed. And that why our favorite "tales" are the Stories (game sessions or "modules") in which the characters' actions succeeded in adhering to (or being reduced to) a stable Narrative Structure, and therefore those Stories supported a Master Narrative.

I'm aware that the sense in which I'm using the word "Narrative" is colored by my education in sociology, and that writers tend to use the word in a different sense. But our definitions aren't really as different as we think. Next I'll explain why.

# # #

It has been pointed out that writers and sociologists have different definitions of the word "narrative". But the differences are not as great as we might think, and above, I promised to square that circle. Here we go.

From the writerly camp we get several definitions for the word "narrative" (leaving aside those which simply use it as a synonym for the word "story"):

  • **A Narrative** (common noun) is an arcless, themeless retelling or reporting of events.
  • **Narrative** (abstract noun) is a direction or theme which guides or gives purpose to retold events.
  • **The Narrative** (common noun) is the form taken by the events of a character undergoing change.

From the sociological camp we have the definition in which a Narrative (common noun) is an open-ended network of stories or statements that a group of people tell themselves about themselves, about their history, about their values, or about their place in the grand scheme.

I think it's possible to see a commonality among these things, that being:
A Narrative is an abstraction of change relative to a person or group

which is very similar to saying:
A Narrative is an abstraction of a set of stories and statements (i.e. "unfinished stories")

Now. What do I mean by "abstraction"? That's where various professions differ.

  • **Reporters, accountants and functionaries** abstractify stories into narratives by removing incidental detail to arrive at **journalistic reportage**, suitable for administrative and educational purposes. I want to call these "Narrative Accounts" not Narratives.

  • **Fiction writers** abstractify stories into narratives by removing incidental detail to arrive at a **framework**, a shape, devoid of individual signifiers but serving as a container for archetypes, themes and dynamic processes.

  • **Sociologists** abstractify stories into narratives by removing incidental detail to arrive at **cultural themes**.

These themes serve as "attractors" around which individual stories have tended to cluster, and into which they merge.

So:

A Narrative is an abstraction of a set of stories and statements, which may be attained by various means.

I shall take leave of the Journalists from here on, because their methods and purposes - to tell the empirical facts of a story and nothing else - are of little interest to roleplayers or RPG designers, and where they are, they bear little mystery. My collaborative game **Watch the World Die** - http://www.rpgnow.com/product/130592/Watch-the-World-Die - yields a straightforward narrative account of the world's collapse in the form of a written timeline. That's not particularly tricky to do.

Back to sociologists and writers. Another difference between sociologists and writers is a thing roleplayers are very familiar with: *the difference between writing and reading* (or experiencing). Notice that they face in opposite directions: Sociologists are **myth-classifiers**. Writers are **myth-makers**. Sociologists tend to be looking *backward* at stories already told, or *sideways* at unfinished stories that are in the process of linking themselves genealogically to stories already told. Writers of course are also able to look "backward" at stories already told (analyzing Tolstoy, perhaps), but in their professional mode they tend to be looking *forward* at the stories they are considering telling. From this writerly position, Narrative not only follows *after* a Story, waiting to be extracted from it, but Narrative also *precedes* Story, informing and guiding it, like a Platonic Form.

This is where we cross some epistemological bridge into recognizing **Narrative Structures**. How do we know they're real? *We know they're real because we can tell when a Story adheres to them.*

# # #

In the case of the sociologist's "Master Narrative" we can say that the subject-participant is "a society that tells itself these things". But for the RPG designer or GM, the subject-participant is "all PCs and NPCs in the gameworld", because the Master Narratives are conveyed through the rules, box text, sourcebooks, character classes, art and other ephemera, as well as via archetypal and stylistic conventions (for instance, all the things we tend to know about vampires and vampire hunters), and verbalized at the table. Like the descriptions of what adventurers do in "Delve", or the rules of chivalry in "Pendragon", or all that stuff Monte Cook writes about how a typical player character views "Numenera" in that world. Master Narratives in the sociological sense map directly to these game ephemera and mechanics, and they're open-ended, inviting player participation. Some of these Narratives may include complete Stories, but it is their *gist and theme* - not the detail of their manifestation - which is really important.

Up until the moment of play, these Narratives look either backward ("The Serpent People have enslaved us for these many generations"), or sideways at unfinished stories in the process of linking to stories already told ("As a Warrior of Gnutaarh, you will play your part in our coming rebellion, and your name shall be added to the Scroll of Heroes!")

But everything changes when we start playing (or prepping for play, or designing certain types of games). As gamers, as GMs, as interactive fiction artists or as designers, we face the gameworld with a *writerly* orientation - i.e. we are looking *forward* at Stories that haven't happened yet. And for better or for worse (which is a matter of playstyle and design intention), suddenly Narrative Structures can begin to appear in precedence of Story again. As observers of the unfolding story our desire for a good Narrative Structure takes root, but since we are not only audience members but also interactors in this game, we can actually *steer toward it.*

# # #

After the fact: Well-written AP reports (looking back at a game session) can be straight narrative accounts, or they can be literary masterpieces. The live games they recount may likewise have been boring and mechanical or wildly spontaneous and imaginative. A good writer can trick you by "removing incidental detail" or adding it. The readers of the AP will never really know what the players in the game felt. But because they're both humans, they both use similar criteria to judge whether what they experienced was "a good Story".

Game sessions and APs represent not only "stories that have been told" but also "stories that *can* be told" in a particular world. As such, they partake of the general logic of "the way stories are shaped" and "what sorts of things constitute a story". And since stories tend to fall into classes based on their patterns, they partake of (or fail to partake of) Narrative Structures.

But *what* Structures? From where?

WARNING: NEO-NARRATIVISM AHEAD

The fictional world has an *ontology* that, while it strives to be internally consistent, is obviously fictional and not the same as our own. It is a "second-order" ontology. The majority of game ephemera - including those Master Narratives in the game text and all the color the GM barfs forth - is there to constitute the ontology of the game world. This answers such questions as "What are Owlbears?" and "What do the Borg do?".

But as for the *epistemology* down there, it's different. Whether the characters know that they know it or not (typically not), **our heads** are literally the source of all knowledge about the second-order world. Unlike us poor saps up here in reality prime, for our characters there actually IS a place where the buck stops. It stops with US, and the knowledge in our heads (and books) here at the table. Because the system and the players (including any GMs) both exist in THIS world, this place in a real human's head is the guaranteed area of overlap between the two worlds.

# # #

How do our characters know what they know? Because WE know it. Our characters never stop and ask us - "Wait, why am I charging this serpent guy?" "Because you're a Warrior of Gnutaarh, you idiot, and this is the story of YOU DOING THAT!" And because we know that we are creating a Story while we are playing, we don't bother to supplant this epistemic certainty. (How would we supplant it, anyway? By making Stories that are only pleasing to non-humans, or non-moderns, or not us?)

As a result, even when playing, even when deeply immersed, there is only **one** epistemology going on when it comes to *The Way Stories Are Shaped*. It is our own REAL one, guided by the same archetypal forms and dynamic processes as the writer's Narrative Structure.

# # #

Examples from "ScenePlay" (game in development)

In *ScenePlay* (in beta testing as of this date), there is likewise a strong interplay between a formal Narrative which exists prior to gameplay, and an emergent Story which arises through it. This makes the game useful as an example.

In the game, players have a hand of cards which represent scenes (generic event types or scenic tropes from tv and movies), and they collaboratively/competitively play these cards to fill out a sequential template representing one or another Narrative Structure.

So for instance, http://asifproductions.com/sceneplay/microtemplate_heros_journey_0_1.pdf is one such Narrative Structure, based on Campbell and Vogler. The obsequious "Heros' Journey" is a *Narrative* in both writerly AND sociological terms. In the writerly sense, it gives themic structure to an as-yet undetermined set of elements resulting in a coherent arc which can be envisioned and communicated - a *Narrative Structure* - tracing the development of change in a certain type of character. But taken as a whole it ALSO represents a set of conventions we happen to hold true in our society about what a "hero" is and what they're supposed to do. That's Hagel's "Master Narrative".

So there we have a *Narrative* (in both senses), and its written or graphical representation (sans signifieds) is a *Narrative Structure*. That's the upper left corner of the PDF linked above - **a conceptual, literary or graphical model representing a Narrative is a Narrative Structure.**

Now. As a game of ScenePlay progresses and scenes are placed in this template, characters, locations and events instantiate or manifest as "real" data-objects, which inherit their core properties or qualities from their counterparts in the abstract Narrative.

When all Scenes have been filled, it is inevitable that you get a **Story,** like this - http://asifproductions.com/sites/default/files/the_other_side.pdf - which partakes of the general themes inherent from its Narrative. But the style in which the elements are presented and the degree to which their arrangement emulates the shape of the Narrative Structure determines how likely an audience will be to concur that it's a *good* story, or at least a good story *of that type,* which is to say: a Story that does a good job of representing and supporting its Narrative.

# # #

The Difference between Narrative and Story *is part of a structuralist approach to game design and interactive storytelling currently being explored by the As If Collective. These principles are at the root of the "ScenePlay" narrative card game system, currently in playtesting. Join the Collective at* http://www.patreon.com/asif *to follow and contribute to this project.*