

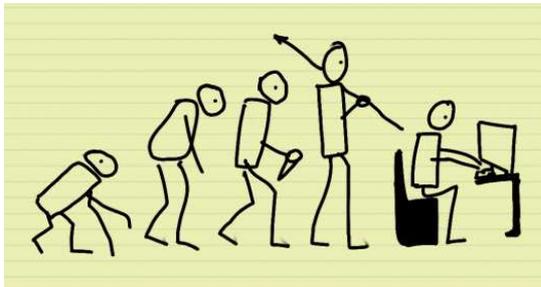
How To Upgrade Your Mental Operating System: Thoughts on Story and Value Demand

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the concept of value demand and explores how to think in terms of story and narrative to get better at delivering it.

1. Introduction



One of the key characteristics of a system or set of systems is the connections between their elements and between systems. Life on Earth, for example, is an intricately connected network of systems as virtually every part of it is linked to and feeds into something else. Big things eat little things, and in turn are eaten by bigger things and eventually, when the biggest things die, the littlest things eat them up as well.

The thing that we don't always notice with nature is that there is no waste — not of any kind at all. Waste is an entirely human concept that we see most clearly in the inventions that make our lives easier but also litter and damage the natural world.

Waste doesn't have to be physical, however, it can also be digital, psychological or arise from the social processes that we live every day. It seems to happen almost naturally but it's also a product of the way of thinking that dominates modern society and so, in this paper, we need to start with understanding that way of thinking.

2. The way we think

Humans are the only creatures, it is believed, that know they are going to die. We have

consciousness, this emergent property that comes from having large brains that let us be in the world but also reflect on it and think about what it means to exist and live.

For much of humanity's existence this meant learning to coexist with nature — to understand her cycles and routines and behaviour, from the seasons to storms and the movement of stars to the mysteries of creation. We dealt with this through stories, by telling ourselves how to act in a world where we seemed to have very little control by coming up with magical explanations for what we did not know.

And then we discovered rational thought and the scientific method, which has led directly to the modern world we live in today. We got there by asking questions about how things worked in reality, looking for explanations that could be tested and debated — ones that worked for anyone, anywhere, and which no longer relied on magic or story.

The one thing we lost, in this process, was knowing **why** things happen. The creation myths, stories of gods and goddesses and their feuds and desires explained why the world was the way it was; why, for example, the sun rose every morning. In their absence, we were left with incontrovertible truth, a reality stripped of story or value which leads to only one conclusion — everything is, just because it is. There is no reason to wonder why. The only thing we have to do to ask how.

The thing we have forgotten, however, is that this only applies to what we see as the “real world” around us — but that isn't the only world that exists.

3. Thinking about thinking

We are so accustomed, so conditioned to thinking that the real world is the only world that exists that we forget that this is also an assumption. Everything you see around you is actually a very good virtual reality experience, one so good that it convinces you that there is something really out there. If you think about it for a moment you'll realise that everything you see and sense around you is actually being created in your brain, in those few pounds of squishy matter stuck in a light-less container balanced on our neck. What you're experiencing is a reconstruction of the world, as your brain takes the signals coming in from your sensors and constructs an experience for you. In other words, reality is what you believe exists out there and, for most creatures, that's where their interest in the subject ends.

Humans, however, have another layer of thinking on top of this one, as they think about what they see and try to make sense of it. The way they once did that, through a rich tradition of storytelling, now seems irrelevant but it's possible that it's anything but — it may actually hold the key to our future. But to explore that we must first look at why a story matters.

4. The importance of a story

For those of us with a technical background it seems natural to think in terms of how things work — how to make roads, or bridges or semi-conductors. It takes us a while to realise that not everything works that way, and human society definitely doesn't. People at large don't follow rules or schematics but operate in accordance with some hidden and mysterious purpose seemingly known only to themselves. What you discover, if you spend some time trying to understand this, is that people operate in accordance with the stories they tell themselves. A story, a narrative, is almost like the program that gets loaded into a person's head that makes them behave the way they do.

When you look at story in this way you start to see the problems we have in understanding other people. If each person operates according to the stories that run in their brains then before we can understand what they want we have to understand the stories they have. And realising that finally brings us to the topic of this paper, which is understanding value demand.

5. What is value demand anyway?



Value demand can be thought of as “what people want”, but that's a little simplistic. It's also what they need or what they should have, although they might not know that yet. It's the “bundle of benefits” they get, the “value proposition” or the myriad other terms that try to capture this concept of giving people something of value. What I'm realising is that the value someone places on something is directly related to the story they tell themselves about it.

If you listen to someone, and I mean really listen — listen in a non-judgemental way, only asking questions to clarify your own understanding, you can start to understand the story that someone is operating. It's very tempting for us to jump in with alternative stories but the key to understanding value demand is to understand the story that's being told to us. That story, that narrative, represents reality for that person. As far as they are concerned, it is reality and anything you have to offer has to represent value within the framework of that story in order to be internally consistent and be accepted.

For example, if you believe that the sun god needs a sacrifice every day in order to be persuaded to rise you're unlikely to let an outsider come in and tell you to wait for a day and see what happens. You're more likely to sacrifice them or if you did wait, write off the facts as an aberration. We cling to our stories very strongly, and there is ample evidence that people would much rather believe reality is wrong than change their beliefs.

6. Understanding value demand

My argument in this paper is that the only thing that matters to a person is the story they tell

themselves and so, if you want to understand what they value you must first understand their story. This is harder to do than it sounds because of the rational mindset that dominates how we think these days. We jump too quickly to the “how” while story is all about exploring the “why”.

It's not easy to find an example to work through either, as they can either seem too trivial or too complex for a short paper. But, because we need examples to work through things let's look at where I am right now.

I'm taking one of the kids to classes at a local centre. My story about this experience runs something like this — I want the kids to experience lots of activities, rather like I did when I was young. I don't feel like standing around watching them because I feel like I'm paying someone else to that and I have no real expectations that they perform to a particular standard. If they enjoy it and want to go back again that's enough for me. The hours I spend there waiting are actually quite useful because they give me a block of time where I can sit with my NEO2, an electronic typewriter now discontinued by its maker, and write papers like this, often turning out a few thousand words in the time I have. It would be nice, however, to be able to see the kids while I sit and work.

Value demand for me then consists of a teacher that my kids like and who teaches them something useful, a space where I can sit at a table and type and the availability of devices like the NEO, a portable machine that runs off AA batteries, boots up instantly and forces me to focus just on the act of writing.

How many of those value demands do you think are being met?

The centre has a teacher the kids like but everything else is less than perfect. I can find a table to sit at and write most of the time but it never has a good view. The NEO is not being made any more and so I'm stockpiling them in case then one I'm using breaks. Looking on Ebay, they're running out so at some point it's probably worth designing my own version.

The point of this little story is that the way I think about this is my way of thinking. Other parents may be more concerned about watching their kids or reading a book or catching up on their social media — but my story explain the hidden programming behind why I act the way I do. And it's not something you'd discover if you didn't

take the time to listen to my story and I won't discover what anyone else thinks without listening to theirs.

7. Learn “why” and then ask “how”

The conclusion I have come to is that to really provide what customers need, to meet ‘value demand’, we have to first listen to their stories. When we know their stories we can then look at ways to do things better for them and stop doing things that don't directly contribute to meeting value demand. How you do that is a subject for a different paper, probably an entire book, because how you go about doing that is linked to the idea of lean systems and removing waste. We first need ways to download stories, to listen to narratives and understand how people think because now that we have an understanding of our natural world we have to rediscover some of that lost understanding of our social worlds.

This is important, especially in a world where it's so easy to put a story out there. In a sense, instead of understanding someone else's story we now have to deal with people getting their story out there first — a phenomenon that links society's shift to the right with social media and the phenomenon of fake news. The stories out there are a little like buggy computer programs and some of them are dangerous viruses. We need to upgrade our mental operating systems to deal with this brave new world.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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