

Could Thinking In Stories Help Us With Strategy?

ABSTRACT

Real life is nothing like the movies, but are there ways in which looking at a situation using the methods of story structure and development can help us get a better understanding of the possible ways in which the situation can evolve? This paper considers some of those points.

1. Introduction

Storytelling is the oldest art form, I imagine. Huddled around a fire, families and communities started to tell stories as a way to entertain others, perhaps to inform them and certainly to pass lessons and morals through examples of cause and effect. The myths of the Greeks, parables in the Bible and myths and folklore from peoples around the world capture the shifting, changing mind of societies over time.

Stories matter, and those who tell them well can make the future happen. This paper explores the skills we need to start telling better stories and creating the future we want to create.

2. The agon or struggle

In every story there are forces at work. How these forces interact creates the essence of the story.

For example, let's look at how children might interact in a school situation. This is something we can all identify with, and it brings up good memories and bad memories, and they all arise from some kind of conflict or struggle.

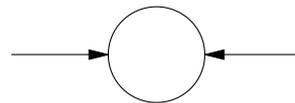
For example, if you're with your best friend playing something that you both enjoy, then you're aligned. You're like two arrows going in the same direction, like in the image below. In this situation there is no conflict, just the passage of time.



If you imagine that you're working on a project with a partner, someone trained in the same way as you then you might agree on the way to do something because it seems logical and

appropriate from both your perspectives.

A different situation is where there is a clash of opinions. This is where there are two opposing forces applying pressure to the same point, creating a struggle, as shown in the image below.



"I still feel mad at those teachers."

These are the words said by my youngest as he sits with me instead of doing his class. The teachers wanted him to do one thing and he wanted to do another. That created stress, a conflict, and now he is sat with me looking very cross.

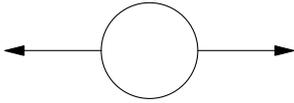
"It's not fair," he says. "She said I could be with my brother and then they chose another boy."

He thinks for a minute.

"And I hate those clubs."

Conflict is at the heart of drama, that's what creates stress between the characters and engages and interests us as the audience.

The conflict between characters can be of two types. In the example above there is a clash of wills as both characters try and impose their point of view on the situation. It's a clash, the butting of heads, two arrows hitting the same target. The image below shows another kind of conflict where the characters are pulling away.



This might happen when two people are trying to get a group to go along with each of their suggestions. Politics comes to mind as each leader paints a picture of a possible future and tries to get people to support them.

This idea of conflict is at the heart of change, because change results from people pushing and pulling in different directions to other people. When you're in the middle of such a situation it's very hard to see what's going on from anyone else's point of view. If, on the other hand, you were able to look at the scene from the point of view of a Director or a member of the audience could you see the whole picture more clearly and perhaps make better decisions?

3. Inside the mind of a character

Alexander Mackendrick in his book *On Film-Making* writes that "A character is a personification of a particular point of view." In an interview he also said, "Imagination after all is the making of images. In the case of dramatic imagination it means the capacity to see an image from this point-of-view and then switch to another point-of-view."

This concept of points-of-view is useful not just to the dramatic writer but to anyone who is trying to make change happen in a situation.

Let us imagine, for example, that you'd like to get your boss to approve an investment in an energy savings project, for example the installation of solar panels. What are the possible ways in which the conversation could play out?

Let's look at it from the point-of-view of the proposer, a project engineer to whom the whole thing is a no-brainer. It pays back within seven years using conservative estimates and is the right thing to do. The commercial manager, on the other hand, has been told by the CEO that they will not look at anything with more than a two-year payback. At the same time the CEO has said that it's essential that the company show a commitment to being green and sustainable.

Similar situations are happening all over the world in all kinds of industries. The moment you take a slightly deeper look at the world of work you see points-of-view and conflict happening

everywhere. The main job of people in the workplace, it seems, is either ignoring the conflict by pretending to take rational action by attending meetings, creating models and writing business cases or trying to exercise power either through below the radar methods like gossip and bullying or above the radar methods like orders and incentive design.

Now, of course, in any situation there is a huge mass of facts and opinion that you could collect and sift through. The point, however, is to plot your way from a beginning to an end. If you were to select your characters — the project engineer, the commercial manager the the CEO and describe the situation from each of their points-of-view then you are starting to get into the heads of your characters. When you do that something interesting happens. You start to play the part of the writer — the part that is, to all practical purposes, that of God in the situation. While everyone else is seeing just from their point-of-view you can start to pull together the elements that can combine to create plot and movement and a story that all these characters can play their part in.

The challenge, of course, is that not everyone can write the story. It has to be done by one or more of the characters or by someone brought in to help create the story — someone like a consultant. The point is that before you can write a story you need to understand what's going on in the minds of the characters involved and that needs someone that is able to step back and see the wider picture before you can begin. So either become that person or get someone to work with you that can take on that role.

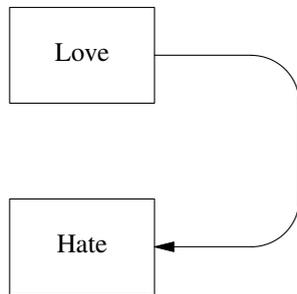
4. Thinking in scenes

Now that you have an understanding of the characters and their points-of-view you can start constructing the story. The key to doing this is thinking in scenes.

Those of us who are not familiar with the language of drama and movies still have the benefit of having watched many of them. We're familiar with the concept of scenes — often thought of as something that happens in one place and in continuous time. A good scene starts with the characters in one place thinking certain thoughts and ends with them changed, in a way from which they can't go back.

For the definitive word on writing scenes you must read Shawn Coyne's *Story Grid* or the pages on his blog. The essence of a scene, according to

Coyne, is that it must “turn”, it must go from what he calls one value state to another. For example, if you start with “Love”, you must end with “Hate”, as shown below.



Thinking like this is not something that comes to us naturally. We see things from our point-of-view and therefore accept as obvious and true things that others might question. In a business situation you might call these objections.

Imagine that a slide or a series of slides that you present has to do with making a point. You might think that what you have to do is explain yourself clearly. What you actually need to do is think about the question or objection the person watching your presentation has in their mind and answer it — turn it from a negative thought to a positive one, just you might with a scene.

Unlike a real story which needs a progression, which Coyne describes moves from the inciting incident to progressive complications to a crisis, coming to a climax and ending with a resolution. In business you try and move from an objection to acceptance — which may not need as much drama but it can't hurt to have some tricks up your sleeve.

5. The End

Writing stories takes practice — many years and millions of words. It's not something you can just wake up one day and be perfect at — but that holds true for any skill worth having.

The payoff, however, of being able to tell a good story is that you can take people with you. You can engage them, enthrall them, get them to suspend disbelief and enter your world. When it's a world of make-believe your task is to entertain them. When it's business your task is to help them make better choices.

In business the way you tell the story often matters more than the story itself. Which is why we should try to not just be better story tellers but

also better at finding good stories to tell — stories that help us select strategies that create better businesses, better societies and that are, in the end, more sustainable in every respect.

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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