

NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study
Artistic Essay

Towards Global Narrative

The Need for Global Inquiry Into Narrative Systems Design

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Introduction

This thesis project comprises a series of narrative experiments, observations, and inquiries that are designed to showcase narrative systems as they exist today. It asserts, as a basic premise, that narratives exist in order to communicate meaning through any combination of abstract and concrete means. It observes narratives systematically, although in this essay, my chief concern is the construction of, and adherence to, global narrative systems—by which narratives (such as *stories*) travel among peoples, typically undergoing change as they do so. In my thesis, I have attempted to better understand the assumptions made by different global narrative forms, the meaning of their interfaces and interaction capabilities, and the structure of their narrative systems more microscopically. In this essay, I focus on better understanding some of the larger artistic and ethical implications of global narrative systems, by which narrative artifacts propagate the planet in all their forms, often in an on-demand fashion.¹

Global Directives

The goal of global narratives—narratives that are designed for a global, rather than a local, regional, or national audience—is to transmit universal meaning to an audience composed of end-users. Any replicable narrative can become a global narrative. In my work, I reference many such sources, and believe these will not only enlighten users, readers, and viewers, but serve as necessary cornerstones for subject understanding. I believe there is no better place to start than with novelist Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian author whose TED Talk, *The Dangers of a Single Story*,¹ reflects the need today for stories that reflect global perspectives, desires, and characters.

¹ I use on-demand to refer to the user's ability to cull the narrative artifact into being, in most cases regardless of physical location. Such can be done in the modern age using intelligent systems and devices, which will be explained in more depth in the *Research* portion of this thesis.

While travelling in Guadalajara, she realized that she had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become a single story: “The Abject Immigrant.” She discovered, quite suddenly, that “when you show a people as one thing, over and over again, [that] is what they become.” She recalled an Igbo word, like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principles of Nkali. How they are told, who tells them when they are told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. This is what makes it essential to understand global narratives not only in terms of their content and structure, but origin and perspective.

Stories as Written, Stories as Designed

When we say that a writer *writes*, we use the term to encompass all the extraliterary activities that account for the creative act of writing. *Writing* is actually *very little of what a writer does*. *It is the accumulation of other activities: outlining, iteration, discovery, highlighting, arguing, questioning, and ultimately, designing*. The writer might examine the cultural heritage of his characters, their emotional or spiritual conditions, or how they interact with other characters to move forward the story’s plot. For these reasons, I do not distinguish between the writer and designer, except in so far as a *writer* typically presents a story artifact whose physical form, at least from the writer’s desk, is almost entirely linguistic, with all visual, sensory, or auditory elements of the story expressed through language.

Adichie reminds us of the danger of the single story; the ways that simple stories portray, engender, and envelop the reader in viewpoint mentalities can be subversive if left unsupported or without reflection time. Alternative points of view are required, in other words, for a realistic, valuable, and robust world to be portrayed. Stories, which seek to portray such worlds, benefit

then from multiple tellers, viewpoints, and camera angles. This means getting in the head of characters, which is of course possible in many traditional literary forms.

Does this mean we can't have a single narrator? Does it mean that every story must, to be fair to everyone, include one person of every perceivable viewpoint? Stories aren't fair.

Perspectives aren't fair. Fair isn't possible with one person interacting with a media artifact, or with a thousand. We try to get as close to fair as possible. I don't expect we'll ever reach it.

Nonetheless, we try to *see things* from everyone's point of view. As storytellers, this means portraying perspectives that we don't enjoy or with which we don't agree. Sometimes, the characters we portray—often intimately and with a deal of compassion—are the sort of nightmares. But we are responsible nonetheless.

Designers of interactive and mixed media narratives are afforded a unique opportunity in that they can tell the same story from seven different lenses, or tell seven different stories from forty different lenses. What matters is that the camera changes. It doesn't have to go from *Character 1 POV* to *Character 2 POV* to a *far shot of the world in isometric perspective*. But it does have to change.

Stories are powerful psychological tools as much as they are social and artistic artifacts. They communicate, transmit, and affect prejudice—after all, they're where our prejudices come from—as well as serving to simulate (remotely) worldviews, perspectives, but people write stories. They aren't natural like fruit are natural. Stories evolved and changed. But people made them. Or experienced them.

The linear way in which we think can be attributed in large part to our stories. It is certainly how graphic and comic narrative artists have structured our understanding of visual language.ⁱⁱ Without verbal language, the presentation of facts in an orderly and necessarily straightforward

way would still be necessary for any sufficiently effective communicative form to take root. Without verbal language, stories still exist—stories are not just linguistic, but auditory, sensory, tactile; a good paperback novel, which traditionally includes no built-in auditory mechanism, can present today’s users with a deeply unique, pleasant, and engrossing narrative experience that is able to make us completely, and subversively *selectively, not hear* the doorbell, the phone ring (or buzz, more commonly).

They didn’t make kettles the way they are because they thought the sound would lift us out of our addictive narrative experiences and remind us of the world. They made them like that because—well, the first one was probably an accident—but one *assumes* the concept lacks any particular reflection on the nature of our leisure time. It wouldn’t be *relevant* in the kettle’s design. Its jarring sound takes us out of *any* experience, pleasant or unpleasant, and *calls us to action* by providing a sound so incredibly unpleasant that we *must* act to end it. (In game design, this might be called a sort of quest). This sort of primal design philosophy—the one of sirens, alarms, and push notifications—is objectively disempowering to the user. The user should be able to control what experiences he has when. He desires control over their duration, volume, color schemes, velocity, and emotional design considerations. In this sense, we *share responsibility and power* with our devices, whose interruptions we tend to accept in exchange for their services.

One of my greatest frustrations and disappointments—when I look at the way that I live—is that by accessing “modern essential” services, such as Google Maps or Email, I must necessarily agree to provide *data* to the service provider. One kind of data would be appropriate here—the kind that says how *much I used*, the one that treats information like any other utility resource and tells providers the volume they’ll need to provide and the volume they’ll need to

take in—for practical and operational purposes. But to put it as plainly as I believe I am able, we don't send clean water back to the sanitation plant. The water we pay for is ours. The waste we produce is theirs, or maybe all of ours. But the deal is a simple one. *Water for money. And when you're done with the water, send it back and we'll make more.*

The water we send back to the sanitation facility doesn't contain an immediately available "footprint" that tells them who we are and *what we did* to make it, so it is in no way like data that we give back to service providers. But data is a requirement. My data, your data, everybody's data. Your name, phone number, email, bank account information, Skype User ID (and every other user ID) replace your state ID for almost every required transaction. This is because they are—almost all of them—conducted primarily on intelligent devices.

Global Narrative Structures

Kurt Vonnegut lectured on story structure, which I will call "narrative structure" here, to show that quantitative frameworks can enhance our understanding of story systems. Assuming story systems as narrative systems, we can take this examination further. Yet by the time of his death, Vonnegut had yet to see a world in which quantitative and qualitative approaches to literary forms were truly intertwined, nor perhaps may there ever be such a time in the absolute. In his "Shape of Stories" lecture series, he describes story structure simply on an X-Y axis, with fortune on the Y and Time on the X, and the diagram existing in reference to what's outside of it—the hero (Vonnegut, 1987).ⁱⁱⁱ

I believe that a range of approaches are necessary in order to appropriately examine complex and global narrative systems. This means defining their assemblages, as Vonnegut seems to suggest, but also much more. In terms of systems-thinking, we must also look at the

individual constructs of visio-linguistic systems. A word is a system. We call this system diction. It embodies letters, which assembled together take meaning and become words. A sentence is a system, too. We call that system semantics. It embodies words, which assembled together take more complex, higher-level meaning and become sentences. A rock is a system. It embodies the intersection of physical, chemical, and gravitational forces, which together tell us how a rock works, where it comes from, and what we can do with it.

Narratives, certainly those in global ecosystems, are necessarily action-oriented. A good story doesn't just call upon its readers to turn the page, but develops in them a thirst to discover, or uncover. Sometimes, a good narrative does the exact opposite, and instills in its audiences a desire not to act, by instilling in them a sense of fear, frustration, confusion, or anticipation. In this way, narratives don't just portray information in sequential, "story" ways, but they also portray reality in order to elicit intended outcomes. To this end, my thesis project has taken what might be considered a largely dramatic approach to narrative assessment.

ⁱ TED TALK CITATION

ⁱⁱ Bang, Molly. *Picture This: How Pictures Work*.

ⁱⁱⁱ VONNEGUT VIDEO CITATION:

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=vonnegut+story+structure&&view=detail&mid=A66ADEF8630DF023867CA66ADEF8630DF023867C&&FORM=VRDGAR>