“Theories of Story and Storytelling”
by Eric Miller, March 2010

This collection of notes asks, and begins to answer, such questions as:  What is a story?  How can story and storytelling be defined?  What are the seven elements of a story?  What are some types of stories?  What makes stories and storytelling great, entertaining, meaningful, and memorable?  What are some functions of stories and storytelling in individuals and in society?  How have various scholars, psychologists, and cultures seen stories and storytelling?

Storytelling can be approached in two ways: 1) the content of a story (content analysis); and 2) how a story is performed (performance analysis).

“Story” can be defined as, a series of events.

“Storytelling” can be defined as, relating a series of events.

“Story” and “narrative” mean the same thing.  “Narrative” is simply a more academic term than “story”.

In a story, causality is involved in some way (along the lines: A leads to B, B leads to C, C leads to D, etc).

Story and storytelling can be considered as types of play.  Anthropology of Play scholars have posited that three conditions to be satisfied for an activity to be considered as play, are that the activity is done

- in a special time
- in a special space
- just for fun

Play presents a model of the past, and a model for the future.
Two kinds of play are
• Art (which involves creating beauty through collaboration)
• Games (which involves rules and competition)

Stories are pieces of art, and can serve as a basis of games.

A distinction can be made between actual storytelling, and presenting a story through other mediums. The difference is that in actual storytelling, the tellers and listeners can give instantaneous and ongoing feedback to each other. Even though making movies (or other recordings, or books) is not actual storytelling, we often speak of cinematic storytellers. To be most verbally accurate, we might say that movie makers (and novelists, etc) are presenting a story.

It is debatable as to whether or not actual storytelling occurs through mediated situations such as telephoning or videoconferencing. Some purists feel that for an event to be considered as actual storytelling, the participants need to be physically present with each other. Nonetheless, as the level of interactivity in an electronically-mediated communication event increases (especially in terms of immediacy of feedback, and audio and video representation of participants), the event may become more storytelling-ish.

Projection, Identification, Empathy, Imitation, and Imagination are important processes when it comes to people and stories. People project themselves into story characters. They identify with the characters. They feel empathy with the characters. This occurs through the use of the listener's imagination. The listener may then imitate the character.

Each culture has traditional and conventional ways of signaling that a story is beginning and ending. In English, one way is -- “Once upon a time”, and “They lived happily ever after”.

Some storytellers like to comment upon, and tell the moral of, a story. Others like to let the story speak for itself, and permit listeners to generate their own interpretations and meanings.

Storytellers often alternate between
• narrating a story, and going into character (role-playing, speaking dialogue).
• speaking and singing.
• normal conversational speech and movement; and stylized (exaggerated, rhythmical, etc) speech and movement
• telling in the past tense, and in the present tense.

What are Some Uses of Stories?

Stories can
• give meaning to life, express values, teach the young, and convey culture.
• connect elements in one’s own self, experience, and life.
• connect one to one’s (individual and group) past, and to other cultures.

• give one a sense of wholeness, that the pieces of one’s life fit together and add up to something.

What Makes a Storytelling Event Great, Entertaining, and Meaningful?

Listeners are drawn in, and feel involved and engaged. They relate to the teller and to what is being told. They forget themselves, and get involved in the efforts, struggles, and behavioural styles of the characters. They put themselves in the place of the characters; they relate to characters’ situations and decisions, on the levels of feeling (emotion) and intellect (thought). The story is important to both teller and listeners. The style of telling is vivid and clear -- the design (of the form and content) of the storytelling experience is in step with the times.

What is Dramatic Tension?

Dramatic tension results when audience members expect something to happen. Skilled storytellers know how to raise and manipulate such expectations. Some expectations are built into certain cultures, through conventions and traditions. Other expectations are universal to humans.

Seven Elements of Story

• Characters.
• Place.
• Time. (Continuous? Jumps? Flashbacks?)
• Plot.
• Narrator’s Point of View. (Who is telling the story?
  Is the story being told by a character in the story?
  Is it clear who the intended audience might be?)
• Narrator’s Tone of Voice, Attitude, Style.
  (Casual, formal, other?)
• Theme (Meaning, moral, message).

Elements 1-6 produce the Theme.

Moments of decision are crucial in stories, as in life. A character’s nature is exposed (or self-created) through his/her decisions and actions. That is: A figure’s character manifests and expresses itself in, is embodied in, his/her decisions and actions. These decisions and actions form important parts of the storyline, the plot.

Three Kinds of Stories

• Personal Experience stories
• Traditional stories
• Created stories.
Created stories often involve a mix of elements from Personal Experience stories and Traditional stories.

Regarding Personal Experience stories: Why do people remember and decide to share certain experiences? What events tend to be considered significant enough for one to make a story out of them? Telling a story involves expressing points of view -- that an event is significant, and how one feels about it. Thus telling a story is an act of moral persuasion. If teller and listeners can agree that a story is worth telling, and that it has a certain point and meaning -- they are members of a community together.

Types of traditional stories include:

- Folktale
- Legend
- Epic
- Myth

Folktales tend to be timeless and placeless, with characters that are well-known in a culture. One type of Folktale is a Fairytale -- Fairytales have a magical element.

Legends are historical stories, which took place in a certain place, often in the distant past, with some divine element.

Characters in myths are divine figures. Myths often concern the creation of the physical world, and occur before human history. Storytellers sometimes bring out -- in characters, and in audience members -- mythic feelings in everyday life and experience.

These categories (or genres) of story were invented, it seems, in ancient Greece, and have been adopted by European and USA cultures. Other categories of story exist in other cultures. It is a good idea to always see what categories of story exist in a culture, instead of imposing categories from the outside. People might benefit from inventing and/or developing their own theories of story (please see below).

Two tools of storytelling are **Personification and Anthropomorphism**. These processes involve projecting human traits onto things and animals.

**Personification**
Personification is attributing human characteristics and qualities -- such as thoughts, emotions, desires, sensations, physical gestures, and speech -- to inanimate objects and abstract ideas. It is a common tendency for humans to perceive inanimate objects as having human (or divine) characteristics. An example of this tendency might include naming cars, or begging machines to work.

**Anthropomorphism**
Anthropomorphism is attributing human characteristics and qualities -- such as thoughts, emotions, desires, sensations, physical gestures, and speech -- to animals, other nonhuman beings, and natural phenomena (such as storms). The term, anthropomorphism, is derived from two Greek words: anthropos, meaning human; and morph, meaning shape or form.

Another tool of storytelling is to project aspects of contemporary culture onto earlier happenings.
Theories of Story include

1) Vladimir Propp’s theory of fragmentation and wholeness.
2) Joseph Campbell’s theory of heroic journey and community revitalisation.
3) Carl Jung’s theory of psychological integration.
5) Aristotle’s theory of Catharsis.
6) The Indian theory of Rasas.

1
Vladimir Propp’s theory (Propp 1928) states that a story (especially a folktale) is composed of three stages (he was Russian):

a) A peaceful home,
b) A break-up of the home, often seemingly caused by a villain figure.
c) A member of the broken home tracks down the villain, defeats him/her, and re-establishes the home.

2
Joseph Campbell’s theory (Campbell 1949) also states that a story (especially a heroic legend) is composed of three stages (he was of the USA):

a) The hero’s/heroine’s community is dull and barren. (For examples: people are unable to have children; there is no rain, etc.)
b) The hero/heroine goes on a journey, obtains a sacred object, and
c) Returns to the community with the sacred object, thus revitalizing the community.

Joseph Campbell was a friend of George Lucas, the creator of the Star Wars movies. Lucas has acknowledged and thanked Campbell for how his ideas contributed to the making of the Star Wars movies.

3
Carl Jung’s theory of Psychological Integration -- which he often called “Individuation” (the making of an individual) -- states that stories are composed of two stages (he was of Switzerland):

a) Elements are apart.
b) Elements are integrated.

This approach has involved seeing aspects of existence as Male and Female elements, which symbolise both aspects of each individual’s personality (micro level), and aspects of nature (macro level). For examples: The sea might symbolise the Female element, and the land might symbolise the Male element. Daytime and action might symbolise the Male element; and night and the regeneration of sleep and rest might represent the Female element. A male character might represent the Male element, and a female character might represent the Female element -- but this is not always the case. This theory states that each individual’s personality is composed of Male and Female elements, and that stories portray, represent, and facilitate the psychological integration (in the teller and in each listener) by bringing these Male and Female elements together and into harmony with each other.

The perceiving of elements of existence in oppositional pairs has been typical of the Structuralist approach in academic thought.
Especially in the USA and England, from the 1920s to the 1950s -- the Golden Age of Modern Western Drama -- there was much talk about “The Well-Made Play”. This model also applied to other forms of story presentation, such as screenplays and novels. According to this theory, stories revolve around conflict:

a) Exposition (situation background).
b) Conflict develops.
c) Crisis.
d) Resolution.

This model does not have much to say about the art of avoiding conflict. Moreover, it was produced by cultures which were very competitive and individualistic, sometimes to the point of being self-destructive.

Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, and literary and drama critic, presented and discussed the theory of “Catharsis” (Aristotle, approximately 2,350 years ago). This especially applied to one type of drama -- tragedy, in which the hero is destroyed by a tragic flaw within himself. This flaw was often hubris (pride). According to the theory of catharsis, audience members feel awe, and finally release and relief, by observing and identifying with a great figure who falls due to his/her tragic flaw.

In classical Indian aesthetics -- as set forth in the Sanskrit text, the Natyasastra (Bharata, approximately 2,000 years ago) -- there are eight Bhavas (imitations of emotions that actors perform) and corresponding Rasas (the audience members’ reactions). These eight emotions are:

Astonishment, Comedy, Love, Disgust, Heroism, Sadness, Fear, and Anger.

(Peace was added later.)

According to this approach, what happens in a storytelling event is that the story presenter presents the representation of the emotion, and the audience members then experience that emotion. Some commentators say that plays, etc, should mix different Rasas but should be dominated by one.

The following 12 principles of storytelling were conceived of in relation to humans telling each other stories with their voices and bodies (Miller 1996). They have some application to the making and presenting of recordings (such as animations and VFX sequences), and computer-video game-playing. As these activities become more interactive -- more experienced via the internet with others in real-time -- they approach storytelling, as a key requirement for storytelling is that an instantaneous and ongoing feedback loop exists between tellers and listeners.

I have learned much of the below from New York City based storyteller and educator, Laura Simms (www.laurasimms.com). Her central point, as I have understood it, has always been the oneness of the teller with her listeners and the environment.
12 Principles of Physically-present Storytelling

1) A Storyteller is Fully Present
For present purposes, it is being considered that participants in the storytelling event are physically present to each other. Storytelling can be defined as the relating of a series of events to at least one other person. The storyteller facilitates the social situation, and is there to take personal responsibility for the material being presented.

2) Storytelling is Multi-track
A story flows from the soul of a storyteller to the souls of her listeners. Although the spoken word is usually the primary means of communication, storytelling is synaesthetic activity, i.e., it may occur on one, many, or all sensory levels -- the latter involving total immersion in the experience. A storyteller must constantly calculate how much energy and resources to dedicate to which tracks (oral, visual, touch, etc.) in order to engage the most number of listeners most fully and to best communicate the story.

3) Visual Accompaniment is Never Essential
All storytelling involves the use of some visual accompaniment, if only one's body and movements. If a storyteller uses external visual accompaniment, it should seem to be generated by and emanate from her. It should not be a major problem if these accompanying visuals are unavailable -- a good storyteller can always improvise (for example, by describing the visual the listener was supposed to see).

4) A Storyteller Has a Unique Relationship with Each Listener
Each listener experiences the story differently. Each listener has her own experiential and emotional associations with the imagery being presented by the storyteller, and thus, each listener visualizes and responds to the telling differently.

5) A Storyteller is Always Listening
A storyteller must on one level remain utterly still and receptive in order to constantly be perceiving messages from her own unconscious, as well as from the external environment (including listeners, the weather, etc.).

6) A Storyteller Instantaneously Incorporates Everything -- including Interruptions-- into the Ongoing Event
One common form of feedback received by a storyteller is a gesture or sound -- often a nod of the head or a grunt -- which signifies that the listener has comprehended and accepted the previous portion, and is ready for more. Interruptions may be accidental or may be a form of feedback (an addition, confirmation, objection, etc.). Regardless, a negative can be transformed into a positive: a storyteller can see an interruption as an opportunity to incorporate yet another facet of the "real" world into the story and the storytelling event, and so add momentum and depth to the event. (Actually, storytellers often plan in advance to have participants ask questions, make comments, even be confrontational.) In sum, the storyteller instantaneously incorporates listener responses of all sorts into the ongoing presentation. In a sense, listeners tell the story to themselves through the storyteller.

7) Storytelling is a Reciprocal, Shared Event
In many forms of storytelling, the roles of teller and listener can switch at a moment's notice. Every participant in a storytelling event has the ability, the right, and even at times the responsibility, to bring the proceedings to a standstill, and to draw all attention to what she is feeling. Thus, if the event proceeds, it does so by consensus of all present.
8) Storytelling is Interactive Largely Through Listeners' Empathy and Enactment
Storytelling events have an open structure in that they are part memorized, part improvised. Responding to listeners' input, a storyteller modifies a performance in countless ways (duration, intensity, intimacy, etc.). Listeners often help choose which story will be told. Interactivity in most types of storytelling has largely to do with empathy: listeners effect the storytelling event by the ways in which they psychologically and physically respond to and enact elements of the story.

One level on which many forms of storytelling generally is not interactive is story structure: that is, many storytellers generally do not leave the story structure up to their listeners. A story is an interpretation of the past and a model for the future -- as such, it is not something to leave to chance. Storytellers have a moral responsibility about where the story leads. Listeners count on the teller and her story to provide a point of view and moral message with clarity and strength, and these things derive in part from the storyline. The teller's certainty in this area gives listeners a sense of comfort and security.

9) At a Storytelling Event, the Human Bonding, the Relationships, are Inseparable from the Imparting of Information
In the course of a storytelling event, emotional and physical intimacy and bonding occurs between the teller and the listeners, and between the listeners. For example, listeners often lean against each other.

10) Storytelling Events Feature the Possibility of Spillover into Real Life
At a storytelling event there is an ever present danger/threat/hope/possibility that the teller will make physical contact with listeners, or that the performance will spill over into real life in some other way.

11) Storytelling Tends to Supports the Individual's Struggle
Storytelling tends to engender a specific attitude and mood. Storytelling is the medium of the human, the little guy and gal, of the seemingly powerless. Storytelling is about the triumph of the human. It is about coping and survival, about the individual finding a place in the world. The storyteller herself, while in the act of telling, is displaying talent and expertise, and is therefore both an example and a teacher of positive social behavior. Storytelling, then, is first and last a life-affirming, optimistic activity -- the closeness, learning, and growing that occurs in the course of performance is in itself a happy ending.

12) A Storyteller is Both a Keeper and Presenter of the Community's Culture, and a Bridge to Realms Beyond the Community
A storyteller is not an island unto herself -- she is a member of a community that has an ongoing tradition. In the course of performance, a storyteller uses conventions that are known within that community. Storytellers inform their listeners of their common past, of how the community has come to be; and they point out ways toward the community's future. Storytellers also define that which is Other to their community, and lead explorations of, and relationships with, that Other(s).

Bibliography

Bharata. Approximately 2,000 years ago. Natyasastra.
