# **Narrative Hypertext, On the Level**

David Kolb Charles A Dana Professor Emeritus of Philosophy Bates College, Lewiston ME USA dkolb@bates.edu

#### **ABSTRACT**

This essay discusses whether the standard narratological duality of *syuzhet* and *fabula* applies to narrative hypertext, and concludes that the hypertext writing complicates the use of those dual concepts.

## **Categories and Subject Descriptors**

J/5 [Arts and Humanities: literature]

#### **General Terms**

Design, Experimentation

### **Keywords**

Narrative, Narratology, Syuzhet, Fabula, Story Construction, Hypertext

#### 1. SYUZHET AND FABULA

Think of a story, say Goldilocks and the Three Bears. There is the *fabula*, the series of events in chronological order. Bears go out, girl arrives, tries beds and foods, bears return, confrontation. There is the *syuzhet* (also *sjuzhet*, *sujet*, *sjužet*, *or suzet* (сюжет)) which is the way the story is organized and told. Walt Disney would tell it one way, Phillip Pullman in another.

Knowing the sequence of events doesn't mean you know the telling, the *syuzhet*, but understanding the telling will require that you come to learn the *fabula*. Appreciating the telling will require that you feel the tension between the two and the artistry involved in the relation between the *fabula* and *syuzhet*.

There are other words for these categories. As Mark Bernstein points out, "The study of narrative is, unfortunately, a terminological quagmire, and is further complicated by inconsistent usages and linguistic borrowings." He goes on to develop his own list:

Broadly following Lowe, the *story* is the sequence of events that the narrative describes. These events are

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NHT'13, May 1, 2013, Paris, France. Copyright 2013 ACM 978-1-4503-2005-4/13/05... \$15.00 recounted to us in a (hyper) *text*. The text may be written, but it need not be: it might be cinematic, or audible, or might combine writing and image in a variety of ways. The narrative text may not — indeed usually does not — describe events in the same sequence in which they occurred, but may depart from that sequence for clarity, emotional effect, or simply because two events took place at the some time....A specific trajectory through a hypertext is a *reading*. The sequence in which events are presented in a specific reading is a *plot*. What we see on the page or the screen is the *presentation*. [2]

In Bernstein's terms what I am discussing here is the duality of *story* and *text*, where *text* includes a specific telling and plot. However I will stay with the terms from the Russian Formalists, because the English *story* and *text* have too many other meanings and connotations.

## 2. WHICH IS THE FOUNDATION?

Here is a question that naturally arises when dealing with related concepts in this type of duality: which of the two is fundamental? Where must you start when telling a story?

There is an obvious answer: the *fabula* must come first. Writer's manuals tell the apprentice to "outline, outline." The *fabula* must be there in order to be manipulated into the *syuzhet*. First you get the old Greek chronicles, then you get Herodotus telling stories and commenting on them, then you get Thucydides writing critical history. Homeric and Balkan bards knew their myths and wove them into unique oral tellings.

There is a less obvious answer that the *syuzhet* comes first and it's from that concrete telling that we abstract the *fabula*. The telling must come first so that the abstract structure can be found. The chronicle writers got their information from stories people told. Those bards learned the myths from other tellings, not from an abstract lists. Speaking of film, David Boardwell says

The *fabula* is thus a pattern which perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences. It is the developing result of picking up narrative cues, applying schemata, framing and testing hypotheses. Ideally, the *fabula* can be embodied in a verbal synopsis, as general or as detailed as circumstances require. Yet the *fabula*, however imaginary, is not a whimsical or arbitrary construct. ... A film's *fabula* is never materially present on the screen or soundtrack. ... The *fabula*, writes Tynianov, "can only be guessed at, but it is not a given." [3]

There is a third answer, that both arise together, that as the storyteller tells the story, the teller invents at the same time both the telling, and the series of events. Whatever was the case with the bards, this answer better fits those modern short story writers

and novelists who let their characters tell them what happens next. Both *syuzhet* and *fabula* arrive in bits and pieces over time; neither is the foundation of the other but each arises depending on the other.

This answer fits my Hegelian proclivities, and I hope to show that hypertext narratives, which are more intertwined, complicate the narratological presupposition that *syuzhet* and *fabula* form a fixed duality where one must be prior to the other.

#### 3. HYPERTEXT NARRATIVES

Imagine that you are writing a Storyspace-style hypertext such as *Victory Garden* [7] or *afternoon* [4]. You are creating the possibilities for a reader to have different readings that present different *syuzhets* and perhaps different *fabulae*. You are building a landscape of events and associations and descriptions that can be traversed in many different ways. You may bias the landscape so it tilts toward one or more conclusions, as rivers flow together. Or you might leave it open. You might see this as building multiple *fabulae*. Or you might see it as providing the material for the reader to build diverse *syuzhets*. In a hypertext one reading can produce a different *syuzhet*, from another reading of the "same text," not just a new presentation of one *syuzhet*. But in truth what you are creating doesn't fit too well into these narratological categories.

This is because what you are doing is mutually dependent and open to excess. Your creation can refuse to be disciplined. It is open not just at the edges of the "page," but also vertically; it refuses to be confined to one level. More plots, more events, more descriptions, more characters perhaps, more than needed for any one telling. More levels of discourse, too, because one node may be a meta-comment on another, or a self-reflection about writing the text, or a counter-stream of other reflections, but all of this will be "on the same level" in the network of nodes.

It is important to distinguish a straightforward Choose Your Own Adventure style hypertext or Adventure game from a richer network that includes descriptions of actions but also links that do associations and meta-reflections.

One way of seeing this is to consider the maps offered by an opensource story creation tool, Twine [8], and those offered by a Storyspace hypertext.

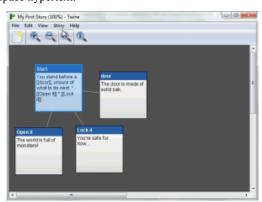


Figure 1. Twine aids the creation of branching stories.

Twine is a tool for creating branching documents. It allows the writer to use a simple markup that is translated into a map of nodes and links, then published as a single web page. It has been used in classrooms and for writing and sharing new Adventure-type games/stories.

Figure 1, above, is used by the creators of Twine to explain how you can write nodes that present alternatives that branch to consequent nodes, enabling you to create a text Adventure.

Figure 2, the second Twine image, below, shows a map that appears more complex, but it is still a branching tree, although it also is showing how different branches of the tree can join at a shared conclusion.

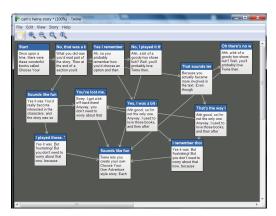


Figure 2. Twine allows branching and converging structures.

Figure 3 shows a map of part of the hypertext *Socrates in the Labyrinth* [5]. This contains examples of complex linking and many different types of relationships between nodes. While this is not a narrative hypertext, it indicates how nodes can comment on and qualify one another without one node being more fundamental than another.

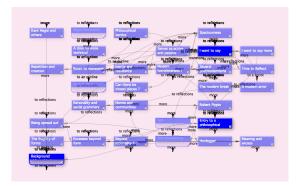


Figure 3. A portion of the map of *Socrates in the Labyrinth*.

Figure 4 is the graphic that Stuart Moulthrop provided to help readers enter his *Victory Garden* [7] at various areas in the work, though you will notice that the graphic offers no labels or chronology.

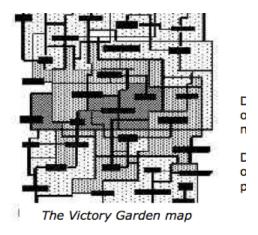


Figure 4. Major narrative areas in Victory Garden

Figure 5 presents a node-level Storyspace map of a portion of *Victory Garden*. The links provides neither a single *fabula* in a chronological ordering of events nor a single telling as *syuzhet*.

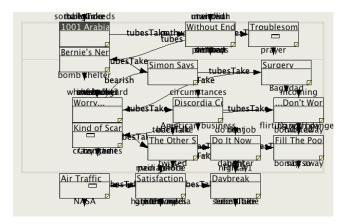


Figure 5. A portion of the Storyspace map of Victory Garden.

The Twine maps may look like the Storyspace maps, with boxes linked by arrows, but the Twine story links are typically from event to event, cause to effect, showing the results of choices. Twine maps are tree structures (though some branches can come together to reduce the number of endings).

In the Storyspace maps, on the other hand, some of the links will forward the narrative, but others will be associative, or meta-reflective, and the patterns of links may loop and intersect.

This richness of connections means that the creation of a fully hypertextual narrative landscape cannot be simply located as being one of *syuzhet* or *fabula*, nor as both together, nor even as a lower-level foundation under the standard two. It may contain "higher level" meta-reflective comments. There is no distinction of foundational and supported levels; rather there is a net of mutual connection. The landscape created in the richer hypertext exceeds the dual categories and it refuses to be confined on a single level.

#### 4. ALL ON A LEVEL

"But," an objector might argue, "in a linear text such as a postmodern novel, we could find that although the text is 'on one level' as a linear sequence of pages, the discourse actually breaks into fiction, meta-fiction, ironic reflections of or on the writer, and these levels can be distinguished and arranged in a hierarchy. So too, a hypertext map may look very complicated with links in all directions, but the discourse may contain fiction, self reflection, and other levels which can be teased apart from one another even though their items are all 'on one level' of the flat map. These levels can be distinguished and arranged in a hierarchy. We would then see a single hypertext reading as providing a *syuzhet* and an expression or embodiment of one or more underlying *fabulae* provided by the hypertext. So the *fabula* is the foundation and it is provided by the hypertext."

I would reply that it is true that linear text can contain complex multileveled self-referential discourses. Consider the unsolvable questions of priority in the relations between the preface and the narratives of parts one and two of *Don Quixote*, or the relation of the footnotes of *Infinite Jest* to the main text. But then I would go on to claim that in a complex hypertext there is no way to hierarchize fixed levels.

A hypertext narrative is not a black-box device for producing linear narratives. It offers a different kind of narrative and reading experience; one *reads the hypertext*, and one does not read it by consulting it like a machine that produces single readings that might be separated and printed linearly.

What is important is not the visual map of nodes and links, but the relations of mutual linkage. Consider Bernstein's catalog of patterns of linking [1], and his further conclusion that

Hypertext structure is perceived through recurrence. The cycle, not the branch, goto, or jump, is the central hypertext structure. Cycles were once thought to be defects, to reflect the reader's confusion or the writer's incompetence. This view was wrong: we cannot dispense with cycles. Even if we do compose an acyclic hypertext, we can appreciate it as a hypertext only by returning to the start and reading it again. [2]

It is true that any single reading of a hypertext narrative will have its own *fabula* and *syuzhet*. But it is not as if the hypertext provides the *fabula* on the basis of which the *syuzhet* is created, nor, vice versa, does it provide a collection of *syuzhets* from which *fabulae* can be abstracted. They arise together during the reading, and emerge from the multiple levels and intertwined materials in the hypertext. The hypertext itself cannot be fully stratified into hierarchical levels.<sup>1</sup>

Hypertext then can be an exception that proves the rule, in the old sense of *prove*, to test and show whether something is genuine. So far from being a weird exception to a standard set of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> My 2012 "Story/Story" [6] offers a tree-structured Choose Your Own Adventure, which nevertheless overcomes the hierarchical relation of story and meta-story. I also argued that every reading does have an implicit meta-story being constructed as it is read. I would add now, however, that this ongoing meta-story cannot be inserted into the text without itself being caught up in the multiplicity of mutual relationships that go beyond and complicate hierarchies. As Wittgenstein would say, some things can be shown but not said. If they are said, they become part of the ordinary discourse and are not "above" on a higher level. In this connection, Wittgenstein remarks that "One might think: if philosophy speaks of the use of the word "philosophy" there must be a second-order philosophy. But it is not so: it is, rather, like the case of orthography, which deals with the word "orthography" among others, without then being secondorder."([9], I, 121)

narratological categories, narrative hypertext complicates those categories and their narratological question which of the two, *fabula* or *syuzhet* is more fundamental. It suggests that very idea of levels and foundations is an abstraction that may be sometimes useful but is not itself fundamental (in any sense of the word *foundation*).

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