

Narrative Hypertext, On the Level

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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*, *sjuzhet*, 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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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 same 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

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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