What’s the Story?
Principles of Complex Systems | @pocsvox
CSYS/MATH 300, Fall, 2017

Prof. Peter Dodds | @peterdodds

Dept. of Mathematics & Statistics | Vermont Complex Systems Center
Vermont Advanced Computing Core | University of Vermont

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On Instagram at pratchett_the_cat
Outline

Narrativium

Power

Shapes

Taxonomy

Essence

References
It’s all about algorithms (stories):

by Brian Boyd (2010). [3]

“The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human”
(Sir Terry) Pratchett’s **Narrativium**:

> “The most common element on the disc, although not included in the list of the standard five: earth, fire, air, water and surprise. It ensures that everything runs properly as a story.”

> “A little narrativium goes a long way: the simpler the story, the better you understand it. Storytelling is the opposite of reductionism: 26 letters and some rules of grammar are no story at all.”

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- Art.
- Music industry.
- Books, magazines.
- Movie studios, Netflix, HBO, Disney.
- Video Games.
- Social media: Facebook, Medium, Tumblr, blogs.

Cultural products from Pantheon:

- Writers, artists, movie directors, video game directors.
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Adjacent narratives — why mistruths and conspiracy theories exist and flourish:
1999 Gallup poll:

- 6% of Americans said the lunar landings were fake.
- 5% were undecided.
- Video replay (The Comments).

Buzz Aldrin has enough:
JK Rowling doesn’t exist: conspiracy theories the internet can’t resist, The Guardian, 2017-10-27:

Highlights:


🔗 The Beatles never existed:

🔗 Per the title, JK Rowling doesn’t exist.

🔗 It’s possible that a person can write six thick books that are translated into 55 languages and sell more than 250 million copies in less than 10 years? — Nina Grunfeld
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Finland does not exist:

The Real Map: The Secret Behind Finland

- Eastern Sweden
  - Where people from "Finland" actually live
- "Finland"
  - Actually a Japanese fishing colony
- Norway
- Sweden
- Estonia
- Latvia
- Denmark
- Russia
Poe’s law

In short: There is no parody too extreme that, when taken out of context, someone somewhere won’t take to be sincere.

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Story Wars:

Nicholas Hénin, French Journalist, held captive for 10 months.
From the end of the interview:

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Just because we have no imagination, we cannot just tell beautiful stories, create beautiful characters, beautiful heroes.

And this is what we have to do because in our world, in our societies what do people want? They want to become heroes. They want to be famous.
From the end of the interview:

NICOLAS HENIN: No, it was just like in a movie. And, by the way, even the people going to Syria, joining ISIS in Syria to fight, even these people see himself as movie characters. They play their own movie. This is why I think that the most powerful way to fight ISIS are not bombs. It is to kill the narrative. We have to write another movie. We have to build other heroes. And this is why I believe that the French are making big mistakes in the ways they, they fight ISIS.

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Stories make us do all kinds of things:

The Comet Ping Pong Gunman Answers Our Reporter’s Questions:

“According to court documents, Mr. Welch said he had come armed to help rescue the children.”

“‘The intel on this wasn’t 100 percent,’ he said.”

He said he did not believe in conspiracy theories, but then added that the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks needed to be re-examined. He has listened to Alex Jones, whose radio show traffics in conspiracy theories and who once said that Mrs. Clinton “has personally murdered and chopped up” children. “He’s a bit eccentric,” Mr. Welch said. “He touches on some issues that are viable but goes off the deep end on some things.”
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“How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument”

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The American Dream = Rags to Riches

The story that anyone can become King or Queen.

Story of individual, not the collective.

But we know about fame and success:

The presence of outsized fame in a social system means social imitation is a driver of value.

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If not Trump, what? David Brooks, New York Times:

“We’ll probably need a new national story. Up until now, America’s story has been some version of the rags-to-riches story, the lone individual who rises from the bottom through pluck and work. But that story isn’t working for people anymore, especially for people who think the system is rigged.”

“I don’t know what the new national story will be, but maybe it will be less individualistic and more redemptive. Maybe it will be a story about communities that heal those who suffer from addiction, broken homes, trauma, prison and loss, a story of those who triumph over the isolation, social instability and dislocation so common today.”
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- Self-plagiarism and more standard badness: *Jonah Lehrer*.
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“We use neat stories to explain everything from sports matches to symphonies. Is it time to leave the nursery of the mind?”

“...we might wonder if the ultimate intelligibility of the universe will be determined not so much by the capacity of our minds to formulate the appropriate concepts and equations, but by whether we can find a meaningful story to tell about it.”
Competitive Punning, *The Economist*, 2017-08-12:

The quip and the dread

**Why English is such a great language for puns**

*Gamers now even take part in world championships*

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Being funny, a grand challenge for AI:


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The quip and the dread

Why English is such a great language for puns

Gamers now even take part in world champunships

<pair> Punster pseudonym: “Punder Enlightening”

Being funny, a grand challenge for AI:


Pun-free paper title: “Generating Novel Puns and Plays of Word with Machine Learning”

“Warning: This paper may cause the reader to groan to death.”
Kurt Vonnegut on the shapes of stories:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oP3c1h8v2ZQ?rel=0
Kurt Vonnegut gained worldwide fame and adoration through the publication of his novels, including Slaughterhouse-Five, Cat’s Cradle, Breakfast of Champions, and more.

But it was his rejected master’s thesis in anthropology that he called his prettiest contribution to his culture.

The basic idea of his thesis was that a story’s main character has ups and downs that can be graphed to reveal the story’s shape.

The shape of a society’s stories, he said, is at least as interesting as the shape of its pots or spearheads. Let’s have a look.

Designer: Maya Elam, www.mayaelam.com
Sources: A Man without a Country and Palm Sunday by Kurt Vonnegut
Kurt Vonnegut on the shapes of stories:

**Man in Hole**

- The main character gets into trouble then gets out of it again and ends up better off for the experience.
- Arsenic and Old Lace
- Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle

**Boy Meets Girl**

- The main character comes across something wonderful, gets it, loses it, then gets it back forever.
- Jane Eyre
- Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

**From Bad to Worse**

- The main character starts off poorly then gets continually worse with no hope for improvement.
- The Metamorphosis
- The Twilight Zone

**Which Way Is Up?**

- The story has a lifelike ambiguity that keeps us from knowing if new developments are good or bad.
- Hamlet
- The Sopranos

**Creation Story**

- In many cultures’ creation stories, humankind receives incremental gifts from a deity. First major staples like the earth and sky, then smaller things like sparrows and cell phones. Not a common shape for Western stories, however.
- Great Expectations

**Old Testament**

- Humankind receives incremental gifts from a deity, but is suddenly ousted from good standing in a fall of enormous proportions.
- Great Expectations with Dickens’ alternate ending

**New Testament**

- Humankind receives incremental gifts from a deity, is suddenly ousted from good standing, but then receives off-the-charts bliss.

**Cinderella**

- It was the similarity between the shapes of Cinderella and the New Testament that thrilled Vonnegut for the first time in 1947 and then over the course of his life as he continued to write essays and give lectures on the shapes of stories.
The New Yorker, December 16, 2013, p. 56.
Ron Swanson:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afWLwPZZy2w?rel=0

“I hate metaphors.
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“I hate metaphors. That’s why my favorite book is Moby Dick.
Ron Swanson:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afWLwPZZv2w?rel=0

"I hate metaphors. That’s why my favorite book is Moby Dick. No frou-frou symbolism."
Ron Swanson: 

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afWLwPZZv2w?rel=0

SWANSON PYRAMID OF GREATNESS
The emotional shapes of stories—Moby Dick:

Partly inspired by Vonnegut’s Shapes of Stories.

\[ h_{\text{avg}}(\text{Last 10\%}) = 5.69 < h_{\text{avg}}(\text{First 25\%}) = 6.20 \]
Online, interactive Emotional Shapes of Stories
for 10,000+ books:

**Frankenstein; Or the Modern Prometheus** (wiki)
by Mary Shelley

**Book happiness time series:**
Explore the work's emotional dynamics by sliding and resizing the reference and comparison sections.

**Word Shift:**
Why comparison section is less happy than the reference one
Reference section's happiness = 6.31
Comparison section's happiness = 5.35

**Word Rank:**
Per word average happiness shift

**Lens (for advanced users):**
Slide and resize the stop-window to change the lens:
Online, interactive Emotional Shapes of Stories for 1,000+ movie scripts:

Pulp Fiction
directed by Quentin Tarantino

Movie happiness time series:
Explore the work’s emotional dynamics by sliding and resizing the reference and comparison sections.

Visualization by @hedonometer team and @andyreiga

Movie script:
Portion of script scored for each point in timeseries.

Zed takes the chair, sits it in front of the two prisoners, then lowers it to the ground. Maynard hands the Gimp’s leash to Zed, then backs away.

MAYNARD
(to the Gimp)
Down!

The Gimp gets on its knees.

Maynard hangs back while Zed appraises the two men.

MAYNARD
Who’s first?

ZED
I ain’t fer sure yet.

Then with his little finger, Zed does a silent “Senic, meany, miney, moe…” just his mouth mouthing the words and his finger going back and forth between the two.

Butch are Marsellus are terrified.

Maynard looks back and forth at the victims.

The Gimp’s eyes go from one to the other inside the mask.
http://whyfiles.org/2015/in-10-languages-happy-words-beat-sad-ones/
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows
by J.K. Rowling

USB in a book? What is this wizardry? Check it out at the Student Research Conference creative lounge. #uvmresearch
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Plot Devices:
Emotional arcs for 1748 books from gutenberg.org

Top Stories:
1: Alice’s Adventures Under Ground: Being a Facsimil... (19002)
2: Dreams (1439)
3: The Human Comedy: Introductions and Appendix (1968)
4: The History Of The Decline And Fall Of The Roman ... (25717)
5: The Ballad of Reading Gaol (301)

Top Stories:
1: A Primary Reader: Old-time Stories, Fairy Tales a... (7841)
2: The House of the Vampire (17144)
3: Savrola: A Tale of the Revolution in Laurania (50906)
4: The Dance (by An Antiquary): Historic Illustration... (17289)
5: Romeo and Juliet (1777)

Top Stories:
1: The Y oga Sutras of Patanjali: The Book of the Spi... (2526)
2: Stories from Hans Andersen (17860)
3: Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old W ays of Thinking (5116)
4: A Hero of Our Time (913)
5: On the Nature of Things (785)

Six basic shapes: Tragedy, Icarus, Oedipus, Rags-to-Riches, Man-in-a-hole, Cinderella.
FIG. 6: Download statistics for SVD Modes with more than 2.5% of books. Modes SV 3 through -SV 4 (both polarities of modes 3 and 4) exhibit a higher average number of downloads and more variance than the rest.
Another Great Moment in being Andy Reagan:
The game story space of professional sports: Australian Rules Football

Kiley, Reagan, Mitchell, Danforth, and Dodds.

Physical Review E, 93, 052314, 2016. [8]
The “I wonder who wrote this?” Great Man Theory:


Highly influential but it’s a trap! 
The “I wonder who wrote this?” Great Man Theory:

“The Power of Myth” \( \text{a}\) \(\text{c} \) by Campbell and Moyers (1991). \([5]\)

“The Hero with a Thousand Faces” \( \text{a}\) \(\text{c} \) by Joseph Campbell (2008). \([4]\)

Highly influential but it’s a trap! \(\text{c} \)
How to write a screenplay:

“Save the Cat!” by Blake Snyder (2005). [10]

9 acts.

Someone important to the main characters gets toasted in the second act, blah, blah.

Believes irony is key.

Logline = one or two sentence summary.

Logline fails to be a summary of logline.
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Seven “good” stories?:

“The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories” by Christopher Booker (2005).[2]

- Seven Gateways to the Underworld (?)
- Overcoming the Monster ×2 and the Thrilling escape from Death (plot).
- Rags to Riches (plot).
- The Quest (plot).
- Voyage and Return (plot).
- Comedy ×2 (plot but really structure).
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- The Dark Power: From Shadow into Light (master structure).
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The taxonomy of stories:

- ANIMAL TALES 1-299
  - Wild Animals 1-99
    - The Clever Fox (Other Animal) 1-69
    - Other Wild Animals 70-99
  - Wild Animals and Domestic Animals 100-149
  - Wild Animals and Humans 150-199
  - Domestic Animals 200-219
  - Other Animals and Objects 220-299
- TALES OF MAGIC 300-749
  - Supernatural Adversaries 300-399
  - Supernatural or Enchanted Wife (Husband) or Other Relative 400-459
    - Wife 400-424
    - Husband 425-449
    - Brother or Sister 450-459
  - Supernatural Tasks 460-499
  - Supernatural Helpers 500-559
  - Magic Objects 560-649
  - Supernatural Power or Knowledge 650-699
  - Other Tales of the Supernatural 700-749
- RELIGIOUS TALES 750-849
  - God Rewards and Punishes 750-779
  - The Truth Comes to Light 780-799
  - Heaven 800-809
  - The Devil 810-826
  - Other Religious Tales 827-849
- REALISTIC TALES 850-999
  - The Man Marries the Princess 850-869
  - The Woman Marries the Prince 870-879
  - Proofs of FidelitY and Innocence 880-899
  - The Obstinate Wife Learns to Obey 900-909
  - Good Precepts 910-919
  - Clever Acts and Words 920-929

Folkloristics:

- Academic area formally started around 1900.
- Aarne–Thompson classification systems

Motif-based taxonomy.

Online classification database
Motivation: “As a simple, historical example from the Danish materials, no one has yet classified (according to the ATU index) the several thousand fairy tales in the collections of the Danish Folklore Archive (http://www.dafos.dk), nor does it seem anyone ever will.”

Imagine a system in which the complexities of a folklore corpus can be explored at different levels of resolution, from the broad perspective of “distant reading” down to the narrow perspective of traditional “close reading.”
“Computational folkloristics”
Abello, Broadwell, and Tangherlini,

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The phylogeny of Little Red Riding Hood

Jamshid J. Tehrani,
Famous folklore scholar:

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Real name: Jeffrey "Jeff" Albertson.

Master’s degree in Folklore and Mythology.

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Fundamental arcs:

- Kill the Monster.
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- Journey/Odyssey: Search for a salvation, a “Holy Grail”.
- Romance.
- Narratives in Left Nullspace: All Stories of The Many.

What about comedies?

- Comedies are not in themselves a story, but a way of telling stories.
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Stories are algorithms for life:

Homo narrativus:

- Provide dynamic paths and trajectories.
- If this, then that.
- Convey and reinforce how to behave, how not to behave.
- Full ecology of stories = Competing, self-defending operating system for people’s minds.

Aphorisms as algorithms:

- Pride cometh before the fall.
- A stitch in time saves nine.
- Look before you leap.
- Anti-aphorism: The one who hesitates is lost.
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The boiled-down essence of stories:

The three fundamental events of (non-clone) life:
- Hatchings, Matchings, and Dispatchings.
- Stories encode survival algorithms.
- Survival algorithms for individuals and groups.
- Dynamic paths: the true, the possible, the unlikely.
- The unifying theme of existence is existence.
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Super Survival of the Stories:

Study of Agta, Filipino hunter-gatherers.

Storytelling valued well above all other skills including hunting.

Stories encode prosocial norms such as cooperation.

Like the best stories, the best storytellers reproduce more successfully.

The Desirability of Storytellers, The Atlantic, Ed Yong, 2017-12-05.

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Stories matter:

Used by Reagan and Bush in 1980.
Template used by many others including Bill Clinton.
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These charts show movie character interactions. The horizontal axis is time. The vertical grouping of the lines indicates which characters are together at a given time.

Lord of the Rings

Star Wars (original trilogy)

Jurassic Park

12 Angry Men

Primer

http://www.andrewdegraff.com/moviemaps/
References


References II

The Power of Myth. 

Plotted: A Literary Atlas. 

References III

