Fabula

A framework for fiction writers

What is Fabula?

Fabula is a framework for fiction writers. It is a tool meant to help storytellers to organise, build and analyse their story and to identify shortcomings or areas of improvement. No matter if you are writing a novel or a screenplay, telling a tale or planning a book, every story needs a structure in order to be pleasant and engaging. The goal of Fabula is to help you get the structure right.

Laying the cards on a table or sticking them to a wall will give you a visual of your story at a glance and you will be able to navigate the universe which you are creating with a reliable and colourful compass.

How is Fabula composed?

Fabula is a deck of 42 cards, divided into three main groups: **ASSETS**, **STORY DEVELOPMENT** and **EDITING**. Each group represents an aspect of the story.

blue	*orange*	*black*
ASSETS	**DEVELOPMENT**	**EDITING**
x12	*x18*	*x12*

The **ASSETS** cards are the ingredients of your story. They represent the questions that you must ask yourself before you begin to write, such as: «Which are the traits of the characters? What is their world like?»

With the **STORY DEVELOPMENT** cards you will be able to develop the story of each of your heroes in chronological order, e.g. Alice follows the white rabbit, then she arrives in Wonderland, then she meets the Queen and so on.

The **EDITING** cards represent the *Time of the Discourse*. They are to be used when you have more than one hero or if you want to change the order of the narration, e.g. Telemachus and Penelope are presented in Ithaca, then Odysseus leaves the island of Calypso, then he tells the story of his last eight years and so on.

Get ready!

Find an empty wall, a table, or another free surface. Grab some **POST-ITS**, some **ADHESIVE PUTTY** or **TAPE**, and a pen. Now you are ready to visually build your story!
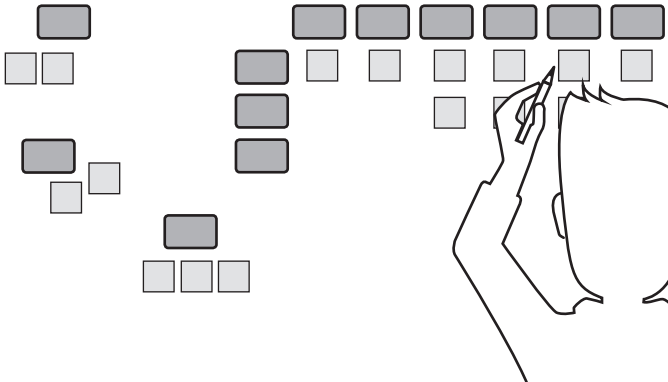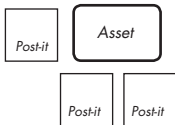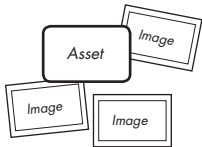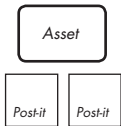
FABULA + **POST-IT** + **TAPE**
or ADHESIVE PUTTY

Assets

The **ASSETS** cards are the blue cards in your deck. There are 12 Assets cards. Place the Assets cards wherever you like on the wall with your notes or images around them.

When building a story, you have to consider many different elements. Well-rounded characters, subplots and a defined space are essential elements in the production of a consistent narrative. You also have to define a writing strategy, set the form in which you want to write and the main contents that you wish to develop.

The Assets cards will help you to do this. These cards are the result of a discussion with writers and editors and will help you to manage the main ingredients of the story.

As in the process of brainstorming, place notes, maps, pictures and anything that can be useful in the designing and planning stages of your story next to the Assets cards.

HEROES Who are your heroes? Where do they come from? What do they look like? What do they want or lack? Which virtues do they pursue? Build the portraits of your heroes up around this card using notes, pictures, etc.

ALLIES Who helps the hero? Where do they come from? What do they look like? Why are they helping him?

ENEMIES Where do they come from? What do they look like? Why are they fighting the hero? Remember that sometimes the enemies are not actual physical characters: is there a metaphorical enemy? For example in *The Catcher in the Rye* the enemy is the fear of growing up.

NARRATOR Which type of narrator do you wish to use? Does he have his own story? How do you want to link it with the main story?

SUBPLOT Sometimes you'll need a subplot to explain separate events, for instance the hero's past or that of other characters. Are there any subplots to which you need to refer? Develop these around Subplot #1 and #2.

CONCEPT AND THEME What is the general idea of your story? And what is the main theme? What do you want to say? How do you want the audience to react?

FORM What kind of text are you writing? Which traits should it have? What sort of language do you want to use? This is where you bring together the formal aspects of your story.

MOODBOARD Put some inspirational images around this card some inspirational images to help you to get inside the story. You can use pictures that remind you the atmosphere or the feelings you are looking to describe.

THE SPACE Where is the story taking place? Put pictures around this card of the space you want to describe. If you feel like it, use maps to navigate your world!

"MAGICAL" OBJECTS Objects are often important: they carry a meaning and propel the story. Think about the apple of *Snow White*, the baseball ball of *Underworld* or the pills of *The Matrix*. If you have objects like those in mind, don't hesitate to use them!

Develop the story of your heroes

There have been many attempts to find a constant structure in stories. The first and maybe most famous attempt was that of Propp. In the age of Positivism, he analysed the structure of Russian fairy tales identifying many recurring traits. Some years later, Joseph Campbell found a less strict but likewise recurring pattern studying myths. This pattern, known as the *Hero's Journey*, has inspired many other scholars like Christopher Vogler and David Adams.

To help you develop the story of your characters, Fabula introduces a new frame inspired by the archetypes of the myth: the *Hero's Steps*, a 14 steps path designed to be scalable and easy to use. As you will see, it's possible to find those steps in most books, movies and TV series.

The Story Development cards

The **STORY DEVELOPMENT** cards are the orange cards in your deck. You should set down the **HERO'S STEPS** cards in a row, according to their numbering, and the **CHARACTERS** cards below and to the left.
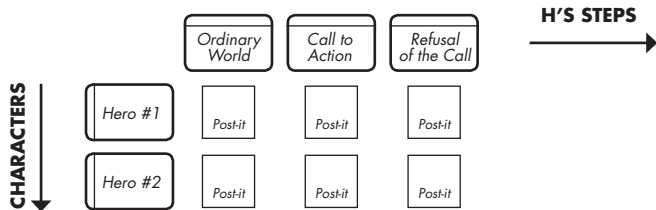
There are 14 **HERO'S STEPS** cards that represent the typical steps of the characters. They are in fact what happens to the hero in chronological and logical order, no matter how you plan to tell the story.

ORDINARY WORLD At the very beginning of the story, the hero is still in his familiar environment and his life is going on as usual.

CALL TO ACTION Something happens to change the balance and the hero then has to make a choice. Sometimes there may be a messenger to introduce the change.

ANXIETY OF THE CALL At first, the hero is too scared to act: he doesn't accept being the hero of the story. Eventually, something else happens to convince him.

MENTOR'S AID Just before or just after the choice, the hero can meet a mentor, who leads him during the first steps in the new world. Usually the mentor is an ex-hero, an older and more experienced character.

THROUGH THE THRESHOLD There is no turning back once the hero has chosen to enter the new world. Usually the hero crosses a material threshold into the new world, where the adventure begins.

NEW WORLD The hero discovers the new world which is different from the one he is accustomed. He gets to know both his allies and his enemies.

TRIALS The hero has to understand the rules of the new world. He will face various trials to learn new skills.

FULFILMENT This is the end of the development of the hero. It may be the first success or the first defeat.

NIGHTFALL In this part the hero gets ready to face the Central Trial. He may plan his actions, understand something important or simply move towards the enemy.

THE CENTRAL TRIAL This is the hardest trial, the moment of the face-off with the physical or metaphorical enemies. It may be either the final success or the final defeat.

OUTCOME If successful, the hero gains something. This could be an object, an ability or simply self-confidence. The outcome can be negative if the hero fails to overcome the Trial.

RELAPSE If the story ends right after the Outcome, it may seem incomplete, like an adventure that is too easy. In the most engaging stories, after the final battle the hero faces a last throw of the dice by the enemy.

RESURRECTION The last and most difficult trial. Often during the Relapse the hero faces the abyss and survives, showing to be capable of using all that he learned during the adventure.

RESOLUTION The adventure is over and a new balance is reached.

The **CHARACTERS** cards represent the heroes of your story. Although most stories do have just one hero, you will have three Characters cards. By placing them on the left, you will be able to manage the Hero's Steps of three different characters.

HERO #1 On this row you can develop the story of the main character.

HERO #2 Sometimes there are two main characters with equally important and complex stories. Use this row for the second main character, the enemy or an ally.

NARRATOR If the narrator has a story himself, you can use this row to develop it. Otherwise, this card could be used for a third character.

The Narrator card deserves a little explanation. In some stories the Narrator enters the events, or his story is told alongside the main one. A classic example is *The NeverEnding Story*, in which the story of the child reading the book and the one of the main character inside the book are told concurrently. At a certain point in the plot, their two stories become one. This is what is called a "metalepsis". The Narrator card can be used to manage this kind of narration, or simply to represent a third hero.

The structure of Fabula is not the only possible pattern and it's not always the same in every story. There are some steps that are likely to always happen, such as the Call to Action, and others that may be absent from a story, e.g. the Relapse. Moreover, the order of the steps may be altered, making it possible, for instance, to meet the Mentor before or after the crossing of the Threshold. Again, each trial often has a call to action, and there may be two Central Trials in the same story.

In other words, it is a reliable and effective model but DO NOT follow it passively. Once you know the basic pattern, and you are confident with your story, feel free to be creative ;)

Let's try now to use the *Hero's Steps* to represent a famous story. We will use the story of Pinocchio, following Walt Disney's version of 1940.

ORDINARY WORLD Set in Geppetto's village. He is finishing the puppet that will become our hero.

CALL TO ACTION Geppetto makes a wish on a star that Pinocchio would become a real boy. During the night, the Blue Fairy visits the workshop and brings Pinocchio to life, although he remains a puppet. She informs him that if he proves himself brave, truthful, and unselfish, he will become a real boy.

ANXIETY OF THE CALL *In this story there is no Anxiety of the Call.*

MENTOR'S AID Pinocchio meets Jiminy the Cricket, who will be his conscience in the story.

THROUGH THE THRESHOLD The next day Pinocchio leaves home to go to school.

NEW WORLD He gets to know his allies (Jiminy the Cricket and the Blue Fairy) and meets his enemies (Gideon the Cat, John the Fox, Stromboli). Also his inclination to tell lies can bee seen as a metaphorical enemy.

TRIALS Pinocchio is led astray by Honest John the Fox and his companion, Gideon the Cat, who convinces him to join Stromboli's puppet show, despite Jiminy's objections. Stromboli kidnaps Pinocchio and locks him in a cage.

FULFILMENT The Blue Fairy appears and asks Pinocchio why he wasn't at school. Jiminy urges Pinocchio to tell the truth, but instead he starts telling lies, which causes his nose to grow longer and longer. This is the sign of the Fulfilment of the hero. Pinocchio vows to be good from now on, and the Blue Fairy restores his nose back to its original form and sets them free.

NIGHTFALL The hardest trial begins to take shape: Honest John and Gideon meet a coachman who promises to pay them big money if they can find foolish little boys for him to take to Pleasure Island.

CENTRAL TRIAL Pinocchio, despite his promises, agrees to go to Pleasure Island. He has failed the Trial! He befriends Lampwick, and they party on.

OUTCOME The outcome is awful: the boys are stuck in Pleasure Island and they start turning into donkeys.

RELAPSE Jiminy helps them fleeing. Upon returning home, Pinocchio discovers that Gepetto was swallowed by a giant whale while looking for him, and he is now living in the whale's belly. Determined to rescue his father, Pinocchio jumps into the sea and he is soon swallowed. He finds Geppetto and manages to find a way to escape by making the whale sneeze.
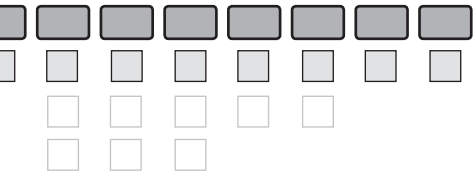
RESURRECTION They end up on a beach, and Pinocchio lies motionless face down in a tide pool. Back home, Geppeto mourns for him.

RESOLUTION The Blue Fairy decides that Pinocchio has proven himself to be brave, truthful, and unselfish and decides to help him. Pinocchio is reborn as a real human boy, and everyone celebrates.

24
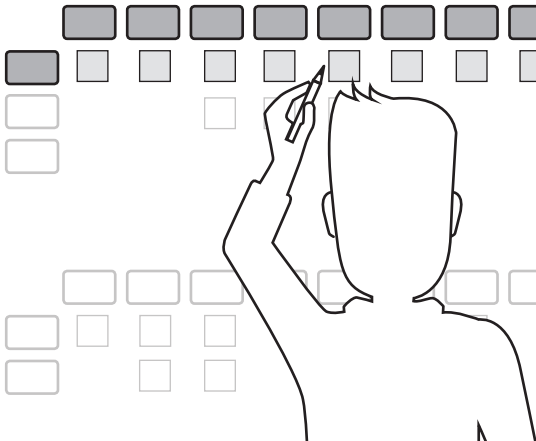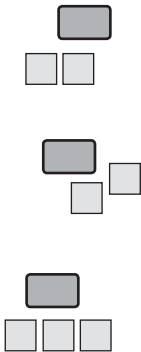
If you have only one hero, and you don't need to twist the Time, then you can just use the Hero's Steps cards and the Assets cards.

But if you have more heroes and you want to play with the *Time of the Discourse*, then go on and read about the **EDITING** cards.

Introduction to the Editing

Story editing can be thought of as movie editing: after shooting all the episodes (for us after having completed the Story Development part), the director decides how to assemble them, choosing in which order he wants to arrange the episodes. The **EDITING** cards will help you to do so. In narratology the editing is called *"Time of the discourse"* because it represents the events in the order in which they are told, rather than the order in which they happened.

The editing could be considered the "final result" because it is the last thing to do. When editing you are facing the question: in which order do I want the reader (or viewer) to receive information? How do I want them to react?

You may not always need the **EDITING** cards, and often the **HERO'S STEPS** cards will be enough for your story, but there are two cases in which you will certainly need them:

- If there is more than one main character in your story;
- If you want to play with time, changing the chronological order of the story.

Editing

The **EDITING** cards are the black cards in your deck. Set down the **READER'S STEPS** cards in a row, according to their numbering, the **ORDER OF EVENTS** and the **CONFLICT EVOLUTION** cards below and to the left.
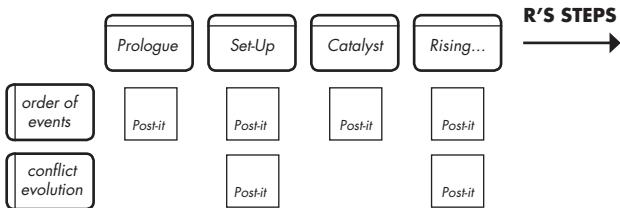
There are 9 **READER'S STEPS** cards which represent the usual structure of a story as it is told. These cards are based on the *Three Act Structure*, one of the most popular and widely used story structures. Basically the *Three Act Structure* means that every story is divided into three main phases: the set up, the rising action, and the conclusion. Each phase reaches a climax that puts an end to the act. In the first and second act this climax is followed by a descent and the preparation for the subsequent climax, in an up-and-down pattern.

The *Three Act Structure* is one of the most common and effective structures, one that has been used in stories from the first classical Greek tragedies to the latest Hollywood movies. There are obviously numerous ways to tell a story but this structure is one of the most flexible and definitely useful to know.

PROLOGUE This is used to introduce the story by showing something that is outside the story, in order to explain or introduce the events.

SET-UP The beginning of the story and of the first act. It is the part in which the audience is presented with all the main elements: the characters, the time and the world of the story, and the actions. In this part the reader/viewer is dragged into the story.

CATALYST The sudden event that changes things and propels the story. Usually it is the climax of the first act and engages the audience. It can be a Call to Action for one of the characters.

RISING ACTION The beginning of the second act, in which the new situation is described. The hero has his training, meets his allies and

gets to know the enemies that he will have to face. Usually this is the most entertaining part for the reader.

MID-POINT We can think of this step as the calm before the storm, in which a short-lasting stasis is reached. At the same time, the audience can foresee the upcoming crisis.

CRISIS The moment in which the audience thinks that all is lost. Usually this is the saddest part of the story.

CLIMAX The breathtaking moment, usually the final battle. It is the climax of the second act.

SOLUTION This is the beginning of the third act and it's all about what

happens afterwards. There may be a second breathtaking moment before the final balance is reached.

EPILOGUE This is a section used to tell something after the end of the story. It may be used to explain something or to show something that happened after a long period of time has passed.

There are 2 **LEVELS** for the editing of the story:

ORDER OF THE EVENTS On this row you can use post-its to order the events you developed with the orange cards. As with the editing of a movie, you will be able to organise the sequences in the desired order.

CONFLICTS EVOLUTION In every story there are conflicts that undergo an evolution. On this row you can manage them and set when to solve or introduce a conflict. Think about *The Matrix*, in which the conflict of Neo with the concept of faith is introduced from the beginning (he has no self-confidence) and it's solved in the Nightfall, before the face off with the enemies.

Let's consider a couple of examples to help explain the use of the Editing cards. We will use again the story of Pinocchio. This time, we want to concentrate on another character as well, Lampwick. The Hero's Steps will remain the same for Pinocchio, but we will have to build the development of Lampwick with the **HERO #2** card, inventing his own story. Now we need to link the two stories, and we can do this with the Editing cards.

SET-UP Pinocchio and Lampwick still haven't met. They are presented alternatively to the reader/viewer. Pinocchio is an untruthful and naïve puppet, Lampwick a rich and spoilt boy. [These are the phases from Ordinary World to Mentor's Aid for both heroes].

CATALYST Pinocchio is kidnapped by Stromboli. Meanwhile, Lampwick decides to steal Stromboli's puppets. [Through the Threshold for both heroes].

RISING ACTION Pinocchio is forced to play in Stromboli's theatre. Meanwhile Lampwick is organising the theft. [New World and Trials for both heroes].

MID-POINT Lampwick manages to steal Stromboli's wagon and his puppets, and he meets Pinocchio. They become friends and, while escaping from Stromboli, they reach Pleasure Island following the advice of a man that helped Lampwick to plan the theft. [Fulfilment for both heroes].

CRISIS After having partied a lot, they realise that Pleasure Island is a trap and they will be turned into donkeys. [From Nightfall to Outcome for both heroes].

CLIMAX With the help of Jiminy the Cricket they manage to escape Pleasure Island. Back home, they discover that a whale has swallowed Geppetto. Feeling guilty, they decide to rescue him risking their lives. [Relapse for both heroes].

SOLUTION They enter the belly of the whale, rescue Geppetto and return to the village. The Blue Fairy, as a prize for their altruism, turns Pinocchio and Lampwick into boys. [From Resurrection to Conclusion for both heroes].

EPILOGUE Years later, Pinocchio and Lampwick are running the puppet theatre and they perform for free for the poor children.

With the **EDITING** cards it is also possible to play with the chronological order of the story. Let's try to tell Pinocchio's story revealing only at the end that he was a puppet! To achieve this plot twist, we will have to change the order of the narration, while the Hero's Steps will remain the same.

PROLOGUE Pinocchio has grown up. While walking he meets a puppet show and starts thinking about the past.

SET-UP The action begins in a breathtaking moment: Geppetto is shown in the belly of the whale. He had given up all hopes of being saved by Pinocchio. [This is the start of the Relapse for Pinocchio].

CATALYST In a flashback we see Pinocchio on his way to school meeting Honest John the Fox and Gideon the Cat. [Call to Action of the Hero's Steps].

RISING ACTION Stromboli kidnaps Pinocchio, then he puts him in a cage and leaves the village. [From Trials to Fulfilment].

MID-POINT Pinocchio escapes with the help of Jiminy, but on the way back he meets Lampwick and follows him to Pleasure Island. [Nightfall].

CRISIS Pleasure Island is a trap. All is lost and Geppetto will starve inside the whale! [Central Trial and Outcome].

CLIMAX Pinocchio manages to escape by swimming, but the whale swallows him. He finds Geppetto and saves him. [Relapse].

SOLUTION They are back home. Here the reader/viewer will understand that Geppetto is a carpenter, that Pinocchio was a puppet in the first place and this is why he was kidnapped by Stromboli. Pinocchio is turned into a real boy by the Blue Fairy.

Authors

ANDREA BINASCO is student of narratology and a great lover of literature. After having won several poetry prizes, he decided to devote himself to teaching.

MATTEO DI PASCALE is a writer and designer. He published the novel *La lezione di Milano* and designed *Intùiti Creative Cards*.

Bibliography

Gérard Genette, *Figures of literary discourse*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.

Joseph Campbell, *The hero with a thousand faces*, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1972.

Christopher Vogler, *The writer's journey: mythic structure for storytellers and screenwriters*, Studio City, CA: Wiese, 2008.

V. Propp, *Morphology of the folktale*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1968.

Fabula is a product
from Sefirot Srl