

Formalising techniques for improvising and storytelling for children's bedtime stories

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November 23, 2016

Storytelling is a valuable, yet sadly difficult-to-master art. It can allow groups to bond, and can be particularly valuable for parents, who often do not have the money to buy children's books to read. However, its difficulty-to-master means storytelling is a rarely used technique. Project Albert provides a fix for this by demonstrating a framework, built on design patterns, which can assist a storyteller in constructing a coherent, consistent story without becoming overly complex.

Introduction

STORIES ARE IMPORTANT. For example, they're a terrific way to bond — particularly for children. Many of us can relate to the experience of being much smaller and telling stories by firelight, or of being read to, or of playing make-believe as and inventing our own tales as we went along.

Fortunately, there are lots of good stories for children, written and illustrated by brilliant creatives, who bring joy to many young people¹. However, not everybody can afford to buy children books, or have the aptitude and training to improvise stories. In these situations, a treasured and valuable experience is lost. Of course, solutions to this problem exist: libraries, television and audiobooks, and so on. However, sometimes, nothing beats a well-told story.

THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE of improvised stories.

An improvised story has a “special something” about it — because it's unique, and because unlike stories written by professionals elsewhere, improvised stories can contain specific elements of the life of the audience². This means that an improvised story can have a greater potential as an agent of bonding between the storyteller and the audience than the standard story.

Unfortunately, a storytelling is a difficult skill to develop — particularly without some natural aptitude. If it were possible for *anyone* to simply “have” that skill, then the barrier to entry would be significantly lower. Were this the case, the value of the professionally-written children's story would remain³, but meaningful stories with the power to bond would be available to everyone.

To bridge this divide between skill required and skill present, some system for guiding a storyteller through their task could, in theory, be developed. That system would need to:

¹ Some of these people, like Jon Klassen, also bring joy with similar stories to grown-ups.

² While it's true that relatable elements of well-written stories *are* elements of the audiences' lives, these elements cannot be specific and tailored.

³ There are advantages to professionally written stories in that they can be illustrated, can be involved and complicated in a way which is difficult to improvise, and can be on specific topics which an improviser does not necessarily know about, for starters

1. Show how plot can be constructed in a way which is easy to improvise, while being coherent for the audience.
2. Show how characters should be constructed, in a way which works within this plot. These characters would have to be:
 - (a) Believable for the audience
 - (b) Relatable for the audience
 - (c) Consistent within the narrative
 - (d) Easy to construct for the storyteller
3. Show how the plot and characters can exist within a world which is defined on-the-fly. This world would have to be:
 - (a) Easy to construct for the storyteller
 - (b) Simple enough to reuse for later stories
 - (c) Believable for the audience
 - (d) A sufficient degree of detail to permit the story to be told properly, without becoming too complex to keep easily consistent.

TO THIS END, *Project Albert* attempts to bring the value and power of improvisation to the layperson. It achieves this by providing a framework, using design patterns, which act as a flexible scaffolding for the storyteller to weave their story around. This scaffolding, in theory, provides a fix for the problems outlined here, and acts as a proof of concept of improvisation-by-design-pattern which can be investigated further and developed upon. This essay provides exposition of the key concepts surrounding Project Albert, explores its usage, and suggests future work which can be done to further the progress in this experimental storytelling technique.

Formalising techniques

Design patterns

Albert patterns

Conclusion

Future work