

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

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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.

You can find out lots about Project Albert at its homepage: <http://projectalbert.net>

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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

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. 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.

Terminology

To clarify some terminology:

Design Pattern: A design pattern is a way of managing solutions to common problems. It's used in architecture and software engineering to discuss a solution to a problem that tends to be:

- Flexible enough to solve lots of problems that match some archetype
- Robust enough to be changed and still solve a problem

You can find out more about all of the terms defined here at the Project Albert Terms page.

Design Patterns and Experimental Storytelling

Experimental Storytelling

Design Patterns

Merging the two

Albert patterns

Patterns for Plot

Patterns for Character Development

Patterns for Worldbuilding

Conclusion

Future work

Appendix

Example stories