

Storytelling

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Abstract

The following is a research I made in 1997 as part of the exam for the minstrels guild. You might already know by now that English isn't my mothertongue, so please forgive misspellings and otherwise strange sentences.

For those who do not know about the Society for Creative Anachronism, short SCA, have a look at <http://www.sca.org>

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0.1 Introduction

In the old times, storytelling was an art not only performed by professional storytellers. Storytelling was an everydas art. If there was the time to do it, stories where told: in winter, when the works on the fields were done or when there was work to do that didn't occupy the mind of the worker. (Nowadays the german word 'spinnen' has a somewhat negative smell, but in the old times it not only meant 'spinning' but also: to make up stories.)

Today we still tell stories: about ourselves, about people we know, about things that happened to us, you choose. We don't call it 'Storytelling' anymore, but in principle that's exactly what it is. And so everybody can be - and is- a storyteller. The only difference is: those stories that were told in the old times, stories about heros, dragons, fairies and witches, and those stories that explain the world for us and tell us about how to behave in it, those stories are now brought to us by television, cinema and books.

We in the current middle ages have an advantage: we have no television, no radio, no cinema, and only a few books. So we could again start to explain the world and what happens in it with stories told by humans and told to humans directly without using a medium for the telling.

So, to be storytellers again, all we have to do is to learn more about the stories we could tell and learn again how to fascinate our audience.

0.2 The stories

Say, you just heard a good joke and you tell it to your friends. Do they laugh? Then you already are a successful storyteller.

What if you have read/heard/seen something you wanna share with others? How can you tell it in such a way that people react appropriate: laugh, if it is a funny story, cry, if it is a sad one and so on? How could you tell the story in such a way that people 'understand' what you want to say? And if possible, they shouldn't only understand it with their minds but also with their heart!

First thing to do for a storyteller is: find a story you really like! That could be a written story of some kind or a story you heard somewhere. Maybe a fairy tale of some kind. Than you should find out more about your story. What structure your story has and who are the important persons in your story. ¹ That sounds easy and it is in fact easy if you know something about structures of stories in general and about the figures that could have a function in them.

A story in general has a structure and some key figures. A hero, an antagonist, a mentor and so on. ² It is given in what order things happen in a story, which figures are really needed in a story and how much time you should spend to tell. (You will find that a good timing can be extremely helpfull.) Sometimes a story has a "running gag" that will guide the listener through it. If you can identify those things in a story, this will make it easier for you to tell it. Just because then you know your story by heart and you can tell it, even if you don't remember every word. And -even more important- you know what things you have to mention to your audience so that the story makes sense to them. This makes it even possible to make up your own new story simply from fragments or out of a dream, if you wish. In short: You will know everything about your story that you have to know to tell it in a way the audience could share your fun.

¹Later we will hear more about finding stories that are appropriate to your audience. First is best to find a story that pleases YOU.

²To learn more about this you should read C. Vogel, "The writers journey: mythical structure for storytellers and screenwriters."

0.3 Understanding a story

To explain how to look at a story in such an analysing way, let's have a look on an example took from Margaret Read MacDonald's great "Storytellers Start-Up book".

0.3.1 Turtle of Koka

Let me tell you about Turtle of Koka
A man of Lubi la Suju caught a turtle.
He braught it to the village.

"Let's make turtle stew!"

"But how shall we kill it?"

Someone said:

"Let's use our hatchet!"

Turtle of Koka was so brave.

He jumped up on his little legs and began to dance and brag before them all.
He was telling the thy could not hurt him with a hatchet!

"Turtle of Koka

Turtle of koka

Hard hard shell!

Hard hard shell!

Hatched of Koka

Hatched of Koka

Can't hurt me.

Can't hurt me!"

Now you know that the hatched really would hurt Turtle.

But he fooled those people with his bluffing.

"Then how can we kill this turtle?"

"Maybe with a knife?"

But Turtle jumped up and began to dance and sing again.

"Turtle of Koka

Turtle of Koka

Hard, hard shell!

Hard, hard shell!

Knife of Koka

Knife of Koka

Can't hurt me.

Can't hurt me!

"A knife won't hurt him either.

What can we use?"
"Maybe a big stick?"
Up jumped Turtle and began to sing.
"Turtle of Koka
Turtle of Koka
Hard, hard shell!
Hard, hard shell!
Big stick of Koka
Big stick of Koka
Can't hurt me.
Can't hurt me!
The people tried first one thing and then another.
Turtle kept singing his mocking song.
They believed his bluffing.
At last someone said:
"What if we threw him into the water?
Then he would drown and we could eat him."

When the Turtle of koka heard that, he pretended to be very frightened.
He began to tremble all over and cry.
"Water of Koka...
Water of Koka...
no...no...no...
no...no...no...
Water of Koka
no...no...no...
no...no...no..."

"That is the thing to do!" said the people.
"That is the thing this turtle of Koka is afraid of. We will drown him!"

Now you and I know that Turtle lives in the water.
Water can't hurt Turtle at all.
But he had fooled those people.

They took that Turtle to the river. They threw him in.
Turtle sank out of sight into the river.
The people waited for Turtle to drown and float to the top of the water.
But water was Turtle's home.

Turtle swam to the top of the water. He stuck out his little head.

He laughed and sang.

"Water f Koka

Water of Koka

That's my home!

That's my home!

Water of Koka

Water of Koka

Bye...bye...bye...

Bye...bye...bye...

The he dove under the water and swam away. And no one saw Turtle of Koka again.

FINIS

To really learn to know this story you have to answer a few questions: First question is: Who is the main character in our story? In our story this should be easy to see: it is the character who plays the main role. Here it is clearly the Turtle of Koka. Second question is: How does our hero try to fulfill its task (and what is the task anyway?) This question is extremely important! Without answering this question, your story lacks the subject! The subject of a story is always: how a hero tries to fulfill his task and what prevents him doing so. That's what keeps your audience fascinated. The task that our turtle wants to fulfill is: to break free. What prevents him are the villagers and what he does to break free, that's what the story is all about! If you answered those questions, you know the "heart" of your story.

Another main character in a story is the antagonist. He or she is always the counterpart of the hero. Those people or that thing or fact that tries to prevent the fulfillment of the hero's task. This isn't always a figure in the story. Sometimes it can be nature forces, or even the main characters thoughts itself. In our story this part is simply played by the villagers. Sometimes a story has other important characters. These could be: a mentor, a herold who calls to adventure, a trickster,... To know more about them and the role they play in stories, read in C. Vogel.

The timing in a story is also interesting to us. Out of what parts is a story made and how much time should you spend on telling them? As was already said, what the story is all about is the tryings of the main character to fulfill his or her task and what prevents him or her from doing so. To see what I mean, just try to imagine our turtle story would begin like this:

Turtle jumped up and began to dance and sing.

"turtle of Koka

Turtle of Koka
Hard hard shell!
Haqrd hard shell!
Knife of Koka
Can't hurt me.
Can't hurt me!
and so on...

There is a task to fulfill, there are people that prevent our hero from doing so. But our story is somehow incomplete: We don't know why our turtle has been caught, we don't know why a poor turtle should be killed and so on. So you see: the "confrontation" part of our story in which the people try to find something to kill the turtle and Turtle can prevent them, is not the only part that is needed for a story. It is the heart, but it has to be explained, prepared and solved!

Imagine our story ending with:

The people tried first one thing and then another.
Turtle kept singing his mocking song.
They believed his bluffing.

This wouldn't be an ending at all! What an ending of a story needs, is the complete solution for all confrontations and all open questions posed to the main character! And in fact, the solution is a central part of a story! In our example, the turtle is still with the people. Did it stay there? What happened to turtle? Did it go back home? In fact, a character should return "home" to a state it had before the confrontation, only he or she should have learned something, should have solved a problem or should be a bit wiser than before. The solution should solve all problems posed in the confrontational part, it should be satisfying, maybe surprising.

So we have a structure like this for a story:

|-----|-----|-----|-----|
Expos Turning Point Confrontation Turning Point Solution

In the exposition, our main characters with their wishes are introduced and the situation how it is before the confrontation begins, this is before the first turning point is reached, is explained. This can be very short. In our story it is only made of:

Let me tell you about Turtle of Koka.

A man of Lubi la Suju caught a turtle.
He brought it to the village.
"Let's make turtle stew!"
"But how shall we kill it?"

This is enough to explain the situation to the listeners.

Then someone says: "Let's use our hatchet!" (to kill the turtle.) This is the point, where the story turns and something new begins. (I call it a turning point, in Feld, Mrthensen et al.: "Drehbuchschreiben fr Fernsehen und Film." it is called a "plot point".) That's the sentence, that starts the confrontational part of the story. Turtle of Koka has to react to save her life. A second turning of the story happens when somebody says: "Let's throw him into the water!" This is the sentence that makes the fulfillment of the task possible. The second 'turning point'. If your story should have a surprising end (which is absolutely required for jokes and such) this is the place where to bring up your surprise in a few -or eben one- sentence. ³ The solution of all confrontation follows, wher all confrontation disappears, where the hero is aware of the gift he/she won (freedom, if you call our turtle).

Not every story is easy to analyse. Sometimes the "hero" (=the main character) of the story is not the good guy but the bad one, sometimes the other main roles aren't played by human figures. Sometimes one figure plays more than one of the important roles. Sometimes there exist other, minor, plot points. (There are always exactly two main turning - plot points.) and so on. Don't bother! As a beginning storyteller, even as an experienced one, you don't need to know all about that! Surely, to know a lot will simplify storytelling and storywriting. But for centuries, storytelling worked without analyzing. So don't give up, if this all semms to be a lot of work to you: Just keep in mind the important parts of your story. For the rest you'll get a feeling by experience! And that is true even for those who do analyze their stories: feeling is not all, but without it you can't be a storyteller at all! Anyhow: analyzing gives you good hints on what is wrong on your story, if you feel something wrong, but can't name it.

0.4 Telling a story

Say, you know a story by heart. Now you should tell it. But how? And to whom?

³This again- is a question of timing: to tell a joke or to bring up a laugh in general you need a surprise: fast! In a lon story, your turning "point" may anyway take a few minutes to tell: all timing depends on kind and shortness of the whole story.

To whom you should your story depends on the story itself. What topic does it have? Is it interesting to children? adults? or both? Very often adults would accept childrens stories, if they are told in a pleasant way! But often, different audiences have different expectations. Certainly you can't make everything right for everybody, but you could easily follow some general rules: by example on an SCA event you shouldn't tell stories about an astronaut fighting Aliens from outer space.

You should also see, that sometimes your audience has different knowledge: by example you could think SCA'diens understand what 'transport-dragon' means. But you can't expect the same thing with mundanes. Let's have a look on our story in that way: You should make clear, why the villagers wanna kill that turtle. You have to tell to your audience, by example, that they wanna make turtle stew. Because in modern times (or current middle ages) turtles are seldom eaten! Not everybody would understand why villagers should kill a poor turtle! So you have to explain this. (One sentence is enough here!)

The other way round, do not explain to much: keep the minds of your audience busy with the story. Let them think for themselves, where possible. There might be things you don't need to mention to SCAdiens but you have to tell mundains. So don't bore yur audience with things it already knows or can easily think of themselves. And here lies an advantage of personal storytelling (vs. making a film, by example). We know who our audience is and we can chose appropriate stories, or even change those parts of our stories that aren't appropriate: explain here, let out there.

An other advantage lies in the fact that you see your audience: you can see its reactions and react yourself. What you do is: you lead your audience into another world. The world of your story. Keep it with you. Explain if necessary, rush up, if they get bored, or slow down. Keep eye contact so you can be sure your audience is with you.

0.5 How to prepare

Read your story aloud for several times! Highlight phrases or words you wanna keep unchanged in your own telling. What things do you have to tell (to explain) so your story is understandable to your audience and what do you have to tell so it makes sense and 'works' ? (If you have to explain too much it could be better to chose another story.) Remember the things you know about the structure of a story and the functions of the figures. What are the plot points and key figures of your story?

Now tell the story aloud in your own words for several times. If necessary

tell it to yourself! Have a look on the text if you forget something. Did you remember to use the highlighted phrases? As soon as you don't need to look on your text anymore, you should chose an audience and tell to people! As M. Read MacDonald says: "You can only learn to tell a story by telling it!"

If your audience likes the "running gag" of your story, (if you have one), then you could use it more often, as long as you make some variations and your audience doesn't get bored. So M. Read MacDonald recommends for the telling of our turtle story: "...let your audience suggest ways to break open Turtles shell: "What do you think they should try?""

In general it is not important how much time your performance takes, as long as your audience follows you! Just keep in mind that the heart of a story is the confrontation. If you want to stretch: stretch the confrontational part! The exposition and solution part shouldn't each take more than a quarter of the time you use for the complete story. But they can well be shorter, if needed.

Tell your story! Telling is the best preparation. The more you tell it the more you will learn about your story and how it should be told.

0.6 Telling your story to others/the audience

Say the moment of telling has come. You might have been introduced by a herold who asked silence for you or maybe you simply told the audience that you wanna tell a story. The first thing you should do, maybe you already did, is: make a rest and gather your audience together! You could do this by looking into their eyes. If there are many people, try to give each of them the feeling that he or she is the one you tell your story to. Now keep in mind that you guide your audience into another world: in the world of the tale. Keep your audience with you: Communicate with them while telling! You can do this by looking in their eyes, answer their questions if there are any! Any questions or comment you get that's not open unfriendly (and even those) should be friendly answered. Know that these "interruptions" only show that your audience is with you on your voyage through the story! Keep in mind that you are there to entertain your audience! Your audience is the important part of your performance! Always react on your audience: what are they feeling, do they still follow you. If not: probably they lost interest in your telling.

If that happens, there could be different reasons. In most cases, the reason is NOT that they don't like you. In almost all cases your telling is the reason: maybe your audience somehow couldn't follow your telling. Maybe you forgot to tell something that makes the 'sense' of a story? Or you tell in a way that

makes it in general difficult to follow. Maybe your timing isn't right.

Don't rush through your story. Give your audience the time to breath and follow! The other way round: don't stretch a story too much! Don't give your audience too much time it may use to think of other things.

Use body language as the story requires. You do not necessarily need to move your body a lot. But when the story tells about a dancing turtle, you could make some dancing movements. When your story tells about the questioning villagers you could scratch your head questioning and look a questioning mine. Let your audience know, in that way, that you live your story: the more you are 'living' your story, the more easily your audience will follow! In each case: find your own style between acting and sanding frozen. Just let your body live free in the story together with your mind.

The ending of a story is the solution of all confrontations in the story and for your audience does this mean: coming back into reality. So, after giving the solution to them, rest a few moments to make sure, everybody is back with you. If your audience is also quiet for those few moments and then applauds, than you know you did a good job: Your audience followed you in another world and it really took those few seconds to come back!

0.7 Working on your performance

In her excellent book, Margaret Read MacDonald gives a few questions you should ask yourself after a performance so you could work on making it better.

Communication and Audience Caretaking

- Did you really see your audience?
- Were you trying to communicate with them as you told?
- Were you caring for the audience and aware of their needs and responses?

Delivery

- Did you take time to pause and collect yourself and your audience before launched into your tale?
- Was your ending skillfull? Effective?

- Did you allow your listeners to savor the ending in their own ways before breaking the story trance?
- Did you use your voice well to carry your tale's meaning?
- Did your body tell the tale with you? If not, how can you help your body join your voice, mind, and heart in communicating with your audience?

Scripting

- Did the script communicate the tale's meaning well?
- Did the language flow easily?
- Was the language you spoke as fine as you had intended?
- Mark the text for spots you need to work on

Control

- Were you in complete control of your story?
- Did you know what you wanted to communicate well enough to relax and enjoy the sharing?
- Where can you tell this story again?

0.8 How to find a story/ Making a story

Best way to find a story you wanna perform is: read a lot! Some stories you could find in MacDonalds book. Find a story you really like, to begin with: not too long and with a clear structure. Then learn and perform it as already mentioned! But say you have a story you wanna tell but you don't remember word by word. Or say you have something like the following (took from M.R. MacDonalds's great "Storytellers Ressource Book"): Story about the abuse of a gift:

... A man got a golden harp from the fairy. Makes people dance all time. Harp dissapears. ...

This isn't a story yet. It's onlx ythe motif of a story, its core. As we already said, a story consists of some key elements we mentioned before plus a certain logic that makes the story complete. (So everything that happens should have a reason why it happens. Be careful not to make those reasons

too complicated or foreign. Or you have to explain your reasons and the reasons for this reasons and so on. This could get an explication without end!)

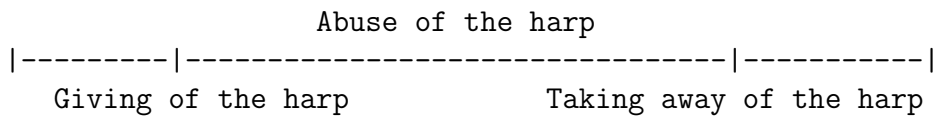
Now, to make a story out of this we need a little fantasy and a little feeling for stories and storytelling, together with the knowledge we have now of the structure of stories and function of figures in stories.

We know, we need: 1. a main character: this is clearly the man. Let's make a living person out of him. Maybe he should have a name, but first let's think of other things. His name and persona will then come together almost by itself.

What we also need is a confrontation. This is the part, wher the man abuses his newly given harp and the reason: why does he abuse the gift?

The giving of the harp should be the first turning point and the take away of the harp clearly is the second turning or plot point. So all that's in between, is our confrontational part. Its our job now to make something interesting out of it.

So we already have something like this:



What we stillneed is a reason, why the harp is given to the man by the fairies. As you might know from other fairy tales, fairies give their gift often to those who did them a favour. Very well known are these stories, where a musician met fairies and played music for them all the night. And in the morning some of his desease has gone sometimes he is hunchbacked and in the morning the hunchback has gone). So that's something we could use: the man could be a musician (this would also explain why it is a harp he will be given) who met some fairies, played for them and gets a harp as reward.

Now we have to explain where he met the fairies: or did you ever meet fairies? Maybe not and so you should explain that strange fact: Maybe the man could have met the fairies in the night in a very rural region. You could make something out of it! But lets say for the first he (as it happens in many fairy tales) went home from a wedding where he played as a musician. This would reflect a situation well known in the middle ages: there clearly where no artificial music from the radio but there were musicians that played their instruments. Those people, as you may know, where very welcomed on weddings and so they got many drinks. To get in the rural place: let's say the muscician lives in a very rural country and the wedding is in aplce not

near his home. So he has to go home alone in the dark. There he somehow met the fairies.⁴

So we could have something like this by now: A musician living in another village played on a wedding till deep in the night. The people liked his music so he was a little drunk. As he walked home deep in the night he suddenly heard laughter somewhere. A voice told him: "Play for us!" Because he was drunk, he didn't wonder and so he played dance music for the rest of the night as he was used to do for the people on the wedding. When the morning came he heard a voice telling him: "Because you played for us you will get a gift: a harp." And a harp appears near him. He takes a harp and goes home, to sleep all the following day. As he awakes he is wondering where the harp came from.

Now we need a confrontation. The musician abuses his harp in using her for letting dance unwanted people. How could this happen? (Remark: here the confrontation is something that goes wrong. The hero is of the bad kind and causes the wrong.) Let's say the musician tries the fairy harp and discovers that people, hearing this harp, have to react on the tunes it plays (it's a fairy harp, at last!). If he plays a lullaby, people have to sleep. If he plays a dance tune, people have to dance and so on. So he could play for the people to help them. But he plays dance tunes to people who don't want to dance. He plays so long till people can't stay anymore and such abuses the power he has been given. Then he stops and fairies take the abused gift back.

Do you see that this still lacks of logic and completeness? Why does he play those dance tunes to people who don't like it? Maybe those people do something he doesn't like. Here we have to decide what kind of character our musician has. Is he badwilling? Then you could say he plays just to show he can. This would explain why he loses his gift. But if he is badwilling, he is like that from the beginning of your story, or else you have to explain why not. The character of a person doesn't change without reason! Or maybe there is another possibility why he abuses his gift? Take the opportunity to let the story lead you where 'it wants to go'!

Maybe we could answer these questions and add a little 'spice' to our story. With the spice and answers added, we could have something like this:

The fairy harp A harper once played at a wedding in a village near his own. He played and drunk what people gave him because everybody liked his

⁴You might notice, I thought of many things, I do not really use in the final story: this is important for making up a story: the more you know about the characters in it, the more they will come to live in your telling!

tunes and wanted to pay a glass of wine for him! So when the morning dawn came near, he was almost drunk but still played on his harp with skilful fingers! Finally the wedding guest went home and so did he walk slowly the way to his hut. When he came to a crossing, suddenly he heard voices laughing and someone whispering in his ear: "Play for us!" As we know, he was more than a little drunk, so he didn't wonder but just sat down and began to play. And he played all the night for the lusty people he didn't see but hear! Sometimes he wondered where they were, but every time he turned around looking for them, he heard voices the voices telling him to play on! And so he played on. And he did till the morning grew when he just slept in.

Hours later he awoke very amazed to find a shimmering golden harp in his arms! His old harp had gone and he wasn't in a condition to ask a lot, so he just took the harp and went home.

Soon afterwards he was invited again to play on a wedding. This time he took his new golden harp to play on it. And he played all night! First he played all dancetunes he knew! And this weren't a few! And the people on the wedding danced as nobody ever danced before! As long as the music played they were unable to stop. Our harper wanted to pause to have a sip of wine, but the people wanted to dance more. They even didn't let him stop to take his sip but begged that he might continue to play. So every time he wanted to pause they didn't let him go but talked him into playing on!

Finally he began to play laments to calm them! And as long as he played, nobody of the wedding guests could stop crying! But again, as soon as he tried to pause, the people began to plead: "Play on!" So he played lullabies till his fingers ached! And again: while he played, the people slept!

Then again he wanted to pause, put down the harp and reached for one of the plenty glasses people had put before him and that he hadn't the time to even sip of!

But he had just put his harp down as the wedding guests woke up and wanted him to play on! And soon everybody was awake again and danced! And again, he played all the tunes he knew. And again the people pleaded him to play on and didn't give him the time to have a pause. And again he played a lullaby to put them to sleep, and as he stopped to have a pause they again woke up and he had to play dancetunes. And again they pleaded him not to stop. And so it could have been for days!

But now our musician got angry! But this time, he didn't stop! He played on his dancetunes and as he ran out of tunes he played them all again and the people couldn't stop dancing! They danced, till their socks went hot and they almost couldn't move anymore, but they had to continue and couldn't stop! At last they began to plead the musician to stop! And now,

finally, he stopped. And as he laughed! Where were those people that didn't let him his time to rest! They lay around on the floor and sat there pleading. And as he laughed! He still laughed as he went out of the door.

And he still laughed as he went by the crossing. And he still laughed, as he heard a voice telling him: "You have abused our gift! You are not worth it! What good you could have done and instead you used it as a curse!" And the voice cursed the harper: he still laughed when the harp disappeared and the voice told him: "And as punishment you won't stop laughing till you find someone that plays a lullaby for you, than you will be able to sleep. And when you wake up, you will be free!" And as our musician was the only harper in all the country, he still couldn't stop laughing and if he still lives, he still is laughing.

All I did to make up the story was: add a little spice, keep up the logic and have fun with the story! As you might have noticed, I used language in a special way: I repeated some words often and like this I put some things in the middle of interest. I cannot, however, tell you, how you should use language for storytelling because this is something that depends almost completely on your own use and feeling of language.

The story as it is still needs a bit thinking: the characters still are very "flat". The more you think about who they are and why they do what they do, the more they get a life! You do not need to include everything that you "know" about the characters in your story.

Without noticing it, your story becomes clearer and gets more plausibility as you know more about the characters and their thinking.

So you see, with a little work and a little fantasy and a lot of fun, you can make your own story out of the motifs you could find in books or somewhere or you make up yourself!

0.9 A list of books that could help you further in this task

- Margaret Read MacDonald: "Storytellers Start-Up Book"
- Margaret Read MacDonald: "The Storytellers Source Book"
- Feld, Mrthensen et al. : "Drehbuchschreiben Fernsehen und Film"
- C. Vogel: "The writers journey: mythical structure for storytellers and screenwriters"