



visEUalisation Project – how to develop
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Toolkit visEUalisation III

Storytelling

visEUalisation
HOW TO DEVELOP INNOVATIVE DIGITAL
EDUCATIONAL VIDEOS



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1. Introduction

Storytelling is as old as human nature and still is has not lost its importance in today's world. Especially in our digital time, where we are overloaded with information, the way how we share information and if we touch people makes a difference.

Through stories, we share experiences and transport ideas in order to involve the audience with their emotions and with their heart to make the message deep and lasting.

In this paper you can find an overview about storytelling. How has it developed, what makes a good story meaningful, what are structures of stories, what are the main master plots and characters and how can you get started.

Last but not least you find some tips and tricks on how to build a good story.

This paper was developed in the frame of an Erasmus+ project “VisEUalisation – how to develop innovative digital educational videos” with partners from Austria, Germany, Poland and Spain. We also recommend the Toolkit VisEUalisation II “Creativity Techniques for Visual Thinking”.

2. Looking back

In this chapter your find some thoughts about how narratives have developed historically. Stories have always been told – since the beginning of human nature. It is an essential element of our human culture, where people documented their world. If you look at the beginning of mankind, people were painting or graving pictures and stories in caves or on bones to explain how they lived. In many of these old pictures we see daily work routines like hunting or cooking, animals or people sitting around the camp fire. These pictures tell stories of the life thousands of years ago.

If we think of medieval times craftsmen and salespersons were travelling from village to village and they brought not only good, but often more important news. They were very popular, because they connected villages and shared interesting stories. It was an early system of media and knowledge transfer.

In families and villages for many centuries stories and fairy tales were passed on from one generation to the next. The content of these stories transported values and cultural heritage. Today we can find different versions of fairy tales depending on the region.

The Greek philosophe Aristoteles (340 BC) was to first to develop concepts about storytelling, which still form the basis today. He started by analysing theatre plays and created basic rules on the topic. He explained that each story needs to be structured in three segments, which are the beginning, the middle and the end and he wrote about the arc of tension of a story. For Aristoteles the perfect story needed to have 3 elements: pity, fear and catharsis.

Stories can be created through pictures or words or a combination of both. In the last two decades storytelling had a revival aside of literature and film. New media forms and the digital world brought different formats, which are used in computer games and online-role games. Also in adult education as teacher, trainer or coach sharing content through storytelling with the students and clients has gained momentum. Simultaneously in science the importance of narratives was moved in sight. More research can be found on the effect and the process of storytelling. There seems to be a consensus about the main aspects of storytelling, which are space, time, event, causality and sequence.¹ In new interactive narratives additionally elements of motion, sound, speech and image grow in importance.

Today in our world of disruptions and uncertainty stories help to generate hope, security and trust. Further we give meaning to our reality through telling stories. We share stories with our friends, in the working context or in presentations to big audiences. Stories can transport content, values, culture and tradition. Stories can make something abstract, concrete. They can give answers to open questions. They make something complex, more simple. They can be fun, sad, touching, exiting, creepy and much more. If a story manages to create emotions, it is getting your attention and creates trust.

¹ Sarkhosh (2013), p. 250

3. Neuroscience and storytelling

It seems that also that the latest neuroscience is proving the effect of gripping narratives. Paul J. Zak, a neuroeconomist, discovered through many experiments that compelling video stories create oxytocin in our body. Oxytocin is a small peptide synthesized in the hypothalamus of mammal brains and it leads to a more social behaviour. In an experiment people were watching a film of a father playing with his 2-year old son, who had brain cancer. They measured through blood-test before and after, that the emotional film created cortisol and oxytocin in the body. People empathized with Ben and his father. This heightened empathy motivated participants to offer money to a stranger who was in the experiment. Through many more experiments it shows that, if we connect a story to a feeling that it leads with many people to a more social behaviour.

This effect we can also be experienced, when we are watching different advertisements. Commercial clips are trying to produce a specific feeling, which should build trust for a product or company and which should lead to an action.

4. Main characters and archetypes

Stories are build with characters, which can be real or fictional. In the film industry one often talks about the Hollywood Formula, which has 3 main characters - the protagonist, the antagonist and the relationship character.² The protagonist is the main character in the story, who has a goal and is going through some experiences in the story. The antagonist is the counterpart. He or she puts obstacles on the way of the protagonist. It does not necessarily has to be a bad person, but the antagonist has a different direction or goal.

The relationship character accompanies the protagonist on their journey. It can be a person, who has gone through a similar situation and has experience and wisdom to share. This can be in a conversation. Often at the end of the story the content is revisited and the protagonist and the relationship character reconcile with each other.

² Link: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheHollywoodFormula>

The Psychoanalyst C.G. Jung studied already in the 19th century pattern in behaviours and wrote about archetypes of personality, which he explained as universal archaic patterns and images. He believes the existence of these derives from stories, art, myths, religion and dreams.

In storytelling and film making there are many variations of this main characters or archetypes, which are all building on Jung available. Here is one very common set of 12 archetypes.

1. Innocent
2. Hero
3. Rebel
4. Best friend
5. Lover
6. Jester
7. Magician
8. Creator
9. Caregiver
10. Ruler
11. Sage
12. Explorer

The characters do not have to fit only into one category. To create a sense of depths, it can combine different aspects. Ask yourself how does the protagonist behave, speak or react? Is the character consistent? Can the reader imagine the personality?

Generally it is also recommended to have fewer characters, but to let them develop well through the story. Characters should be unique, but at the same time clear and understandable.

5. Master Plots

The scientist for media Ronald B. Tobias listed 20 master plots, which he believes all stories are based on. A plot describes the main theme and answers the questions: “What is your story, film or video about?”

He explains further that for the writer it is important to know, what the main plot is, but there is no need to explain it to the audience. He sees the plot as the underground river in the desert, which you never see, but which is influencing the whole landscape.

Here are the 20 master plots in a nutshell:

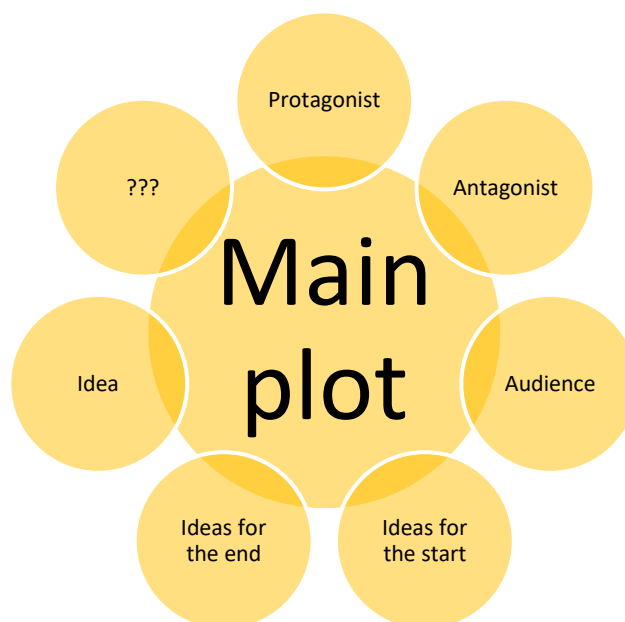
1. **Quest:** A character-driven story that has a hero go on a journey for something that changes him in some way.
2. **Adventure** is a story, where the focus is more on the journey, then on the hero reaching the destiny. The hero has to go through some dangerous situations.
3. **Pursuit:** In this plot the chase is more important than the people in it. It is very action-oriented and needs to have real danger of getting caught.
4. **Rescue** is an action-oriented story and is built around a hero, a villain and a victim.
5. **Escape** is similar to the rescue, but the hero is the victim, who is confined against his will and wants to escape.
6. **Revenge** is a story around a protagonist, who seeks retaliation against the protagonist for a real or imagined injury.
7. The **Riddle** usually challenges the audience to solve the challenge before the protagonist does.
8. **Rivalry** is a character-oriented story based on the interactions of two opposing characters – the hero and the rival.
9. **Underdog:** A story about the antagonist = person, place or thing (e.g. bureaucracy) that has more power than the protagonist. The Underdog = protagonist usually overcomes the opposition.
10. **Temptation** is a story whether or not to give into a temptation and the consequences of it. Opening Pandora-Box like.
11. **Metamorphosis** is usually the result of a curse. The cure for it is generally love and a one-way street.
12. **Transformation** – a story revolving around an inner-change, rather than a physical one.
13. **Maturation** is a coming-of-age story, where the character matures physically, emotionally or spiritually.
14. **Love** is a basic romance with two characters falling in love as the main story.
15. **Forbidden Love** is a plot, where the characters spend most of the time trying to be together despite the world trying to tear them apart.

16. **Sacrifice** is a story around a character with a strong moral dilemma.
17. **Discovery** is a story about characters making a discovery about themselves. It can e.g. come up through a secret in the past that is revealed.
18. **Wretched Excess** is usually about a psychological decline of a character. It is often a downward spiral e.g. from drugs, greed, depression, insanity.
19. **Ascension** follows a character's rise to power.
20. **Descension** like-wise to ascension, follows a character fall from power.

6. How to get started

Telling a good story takes first of all time for preparation. Taking the time to think about what the essence of your story is pays off. Find here some general questions and topics to think about, when starting to plan your story. This can be for an oral anecdote in a speech or when developing a storyboard for an educational video with videoscribe.

Once you have decided to write or tell a story, it is helpful to start by brainstorming all the ideas. One way to collect them is with post-its or moderation cards. But there is also different software available, which help you creating a mind map (see also Analysis on open source software). You can also use ready-to-use diagrams, which you can find in any word-programme, such as the presentation underneath.



Here are some topics and questions to start with.

- Be clear about your **audience**. For whom are you writing or creating a story? Is it for the educational context? Is it for children or adults? Is it for scientific or expert community or should it reach the general public?
- **Purpose**: What do you want to achieve with the story? Is it a marketing story, which should lead to selling something? Has it an educational purpose?
- The **topic** is the main theme, such as leadership, diversity or sustainability. What is your story about? Can you explain it in a few words?
- **Plot**: One thing is the topic, the other is the **main plot**. What type of story do you want to tell your audience? What emotions do you want to create? (see also chapter on the master plot)
- Who are the main **characters**? Who is the protagonist? Who or what is the counterpart (=antagonist)? Who are the other characters in the story (see also chapter on the archetypes for ideas)
- Find a good **entry point**: You need to catch people, when they start reading or listening. Are you torn into the story? Does it invite you to read further? Does it create curiosity? In this starting phase you also set the frame – where is the story happening, in which time and who and how are the main characters.
Example: “Look”, Maria said, as the car gathered speed. She pointed with her finger towards the sky. “Look, what is in front there?”
- **Main part**: you are building up step by step the tension till the highlight. (see also chapter on story telling concepts)
- **Ending**: What is the message you want to bring across? The ending has to stick in the mind of the audience. It can be funny, serious, shocking or it can have an open end e.g. with a question.
- **Further questions**: When starting to sort your thoughts and can think about some of these questions:
 - What makes your story unique?
 - Why is this story needed at this moment?
 - What stereotypes and clichés do I want to avoid?

7. Some storytelling concepts

a. Story in 3 acts

This structure is a traditional arc of a story and is used in poets, films and theatre plays. It is very simple format for all types of stories and videos. It is also the way how children at school learn to write their first essays.

1. **Introduction:** In this phase you explain the problem, introduce the character and establish what they are up. There should be a feeling that it will take serious effort to solve the issue. At the end of this act the audience wants to know, why the protagonist has not yet reached its goals and what is standing in the way.
2. **Middle act:** A character works towards a solution: In this part the character attempts to solve the problem and makes a conscious effort to handle the situations. The story increases its intensity. In this phase, the specific attributes of the main character come out. The second act ends with a turning point, some kind of crisis. Often at the end of the second act it is not clear, if the protagonist will be able to solve the challenges.
3. In the **final act** the character solves the problem or fails in handling the challenge. In this chapter it is important to remember, what you want communicate with your message. Depending on what you want to say, the story might have a happy, sad or open ending.

The strengths of this structure lies in the very simple format, which can be used for any type of story, video, poem or even game. It is also a helpful format for videoscribe, as they need to be short and tightly arranged.

Following here you can find a simple exercise, which supports you to take a first step into storytelling and which helps you open up to your own creativity. This basic story structure can be adopted and can be used for growing and developing ideas.

Exercise: Create your own story

Basic story structure	Your story
When I was a child, I wanted to be	
And then ...	
And then ...	
... but one day ...	
That is why I am here today.	

Example: When I was a child I wanted to become an actress and **then** growing up I found out that it can be a very lonely life, being on a stage all the time and **then** I decided to study communication and worked as a journalist. **But one day** I found an advertisement about a job in Brussels and **that is why** I started to work in the international field, where I found my true passion.

b. Story in 5 acts

The 5 acts are an extension of the 3 act-story-board. It was developed by the German Dramaturge Gustav Freytag. These are the five acts, which are building up until the climax and going down after the turning point in the 3rd act.

1. **Exposition:** In this act the audience learns about the main frame, the characters, the setting (time / place). The main conflict will be introduced.
2. **Rising action:** This act is leading to the climax. Usually the protagonist is facing some obstacles in his way. The story is gradually building up. Side-lines will be introduced in this chapter.
3. **Climax:** This is the turning point of the story. Usually it is the highest amount of suspense und you can feel that there is some form of a change coming up.

4. **Falling action:** It is the counterpart of the “rising action”. Here all unknown details are revealed and wrapped up. The story is coming to an end.
5. **Resolution:** This is the finalisation of the story, where also all side-lines will be closed. It can include a lesson learned for the protagonist and the audience.

Example of 5-act structure: Romeo and Juliet



Source: <https://www.storyboardthat.com/articles/e/five-act-structure>

Act 1: **The Exposition**

Setting: Verona Italy, 16th or 17th century

Characters: Capulets and Montagues, specifically, Romeo and Juliet

Conflict: The Montagues and Capulets are feuding

Act 2: **Rising Action**

Romeo and Juliet fall in love, but cannot be together because their families do not like each other. They decide to get married in secret.

Act 3: **The Climax**

After crashing the Capulet party, Tybalt goes after the Montague crew and kills Mercutio.

To avenge his friend, Romeo duels with and kills Tybalt - Juliet's cousin.

Romeo is banished, but before he goes, he gives Juliet a proper wedding night!

Act 4: **Falling Action**

Juliet's parents arrange a marriage for her to Paris.

She and the Friar have an elaborate plan to get her out of a second marriage by faking her death. Part of this plan is that Romeo will receive a letter saying she's not dead.

Romeo - never having received the letter - thinks Juliet has died. Romeo buys poison and goes to her tomb to commit suicide.

Act 5: **Denouement or Resolution**

Romeo confronts Paris at Juliet's tomb, and slays him before taking his own life. Juliet awakens from her sleeping potion to see Romeo has committed suicide. She takes his dagger and kills herself. The Friar and Nurse explain to the Capulet and Montague families that the two lovers were married in secret.

Both families are saddened by the situation, and vow to end their long-standing feud.

c. The journey of the hero

The journey of the hero was developed by Christopher Vogler in his book "The writer's journey" building on Joseph Campbell's archetypical hero from the 40ties. In this theory Vogler divided the story of the hero in 12 parts. There are 5 parts in the first act, 4 in the second and 3 in the last act. The hero runs through all of the 12 steps and grows gradually through his path. The hero develops both inside and outside and becomes self-aware and whole.

The model is inspired by the myths, which puts the development of a person in the centre. It is a useful model for substantial and elaborated stories and videos. These are the 12 parts within the 3 acts:

Act 1

- 1) Ordinary World
- 2) Call to adventure
- 3) Refusal of the call
- 4) Meeting with the mentor
- 5) Crossing the first Threshold

Act 2

- 6) Test, Allies and Enemies
- 7) Approach to the inmost cave
- 8) Ordeal
- 9) Reward

Act 3

- 10) The Road back
- 11) Resurrection
- 12) Return with the Elixir

8. Some further tips for your story

- 1) Try to keep it simple. Reduce the number of characters and create a clear and easy to follow story line.
- 2) Figure out what is the essence of your story? If you know that, you can build up from there.
- 3) Come up with your ending before you figure out your middle. It can be an important moment to bring back your main message or idea.
- 4) The main plot of a story does not have to be explicitly explained. It can be a stream, which is underneath the story.
- 5) If you are creating a videoscribe, a video or film avoid or reduce dialogues as much as possible and trust the pictures. What is in the pictures does not need to be said, e.g. instead of saying “He is slow.” you can show a picture of a snail or watch instead.
- 6) Every information only once – there is no need for repetition
- 7) You will never build the perfect story. Allow yourself to finish it and let it go.
- 8) Give your characters opinions. Passive/malleable characters are more easy to write about, but it is not so fascinating for your audience.
- 9) Challenge your own stereotypes and clichés. Find a critical audience to test your story, videoscribe or film.
- 10) Find a title, which creates curiosity.

9. Imprint

This paper was written in the frame of the Erasmus+ Project “visEUalisation – How to develop innovative digital educational videos”.

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