



Constructive Criticism: Holiday "Fair"

by Melanie Anne Phillips
& Chris Huntley

'Tis the season for good movies. Usually. This year is an exception. Rather than being exceptional, there is another word that best describes the films in current release for this holiday: *fair*.

Mediocre, they are, almost to a one. In keeping with the spirit of the season, Dramatica generously offers a package of several mini-critiques as a holiday *present* so we can get *past* these tepid extravaganzas and use what we've learned to create more sparkle in the *future*. As Bugs Bunny once said, aren't we "a little Dickens!"



Speed-Gate

Two action/adventure films doing quite well this holiday season (one on video, the other in the theaters) suffer similar significant (but not completely debilitating) storyforming flaws. The two films in question are *Speed* and *Stargate*.

The popularity of both films indicate that their producers have found a receptive audience, so why

the grouching? Because they could easily have been better. The two storyforming weaknesses shared by *Speed* and *Stargate* concern each story's *limit*, and each story's unclear identification of the Obstacle Character. Though it is not a sure thing that fixing their storyforming flaws would increase the films' profit margins, it's certain that fixing the flaws would increase their audiences' satisfaction.

Storyforming impacts a story's *meaning*. Storytelling impacts audience *entertainment* independent of meaning. When a story has a proper storyform and decent storytelling, an audience will find the story both meaningful *and* entertaining.

Violating the Speed Limit

Every closed story has some form of limit that draws the story to an end. The limit can take the form of a timelock (a limited amount of time) or an optionlock (a limited number of options). The story limit lets an audience know *upfront* when the story is going to be over — the extent of the story's boundaries. The moment of reckoning arrives when the allotted time has run out or the options have been exhausted. Only then can an audience tell if the characters' efforts have led to success or failure (was the goal achieved or must the consequences be suffered?), and whether or not the decision the Main Character made was good or bad for him. Unfortunately for *Speed*, it violates its own limits and ends up with two endings and a muddled message.

Early on in *Speed*, a timelock is firmly established. The mad bomber, Howard Payne (played by Dennis Hopper), has rigged an RTD bus with a bomb that will go off at a specific time (11:00 a.m.). On top of that, he has added additional constraints by not

Inside this Issue:

Analysis: <i>Speed</i> and <i>Stargate</i>	1
Dramatica Audio Cassette Offer	2
Dramatica for Windows	2
Free Workshop Notice	2
Subscription Information	2
Analysis: <i>Interview With The Vampire</i>	5
Analysis: <i>The Pagemaster</i>	7
Analysis: <i>Star Trek: Generations</i>	9
Storytelling Tips	10
Deep Theory Discussion Group	13
Poem: <i>The Day After Christmas</i>	15
Calendar	Back Cover

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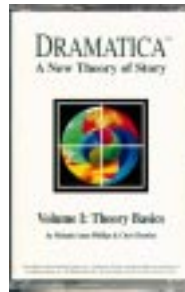
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Page 13 —

Speed Trap (from page 1)

allowing the bus to decelerate below 50 m.p.h. and not allowing any of the passengers to leave the bus without the bomb being triggered early. Though these additional limitations appear to be an optionlock, they do not fit the bill because they only limit the actions of the characters within the story, not the scope of the story itself. If we removed the timelock, the bus could run around in circles forever as long as food and gas were replenished. If we removed the speed and passenger options, however, the bus would still blow up once the time was up.

Since a primary purpose of a story limit is to help an audience know whether the story ended in success or failure, let's look to *Speed's* goal and consequence. The goal is to save the passengers and stop the mad bomber for good. The consequence is dead passengers and more bombings. Combining the goal and consequence with the time limit, the story should be to save the passengers and stop the mad bomber for good before 11:00 a.m., or there will be lots of dead commuters and the likelihood of more to come. Sounds pretty close to what was intended in the film. The timelock, alas, is never allowed to play out.

Before the time is up, clever Jack Traven, played by Keanu Reeves, gets everybody off of the bus. The bus then drops below the 50 m.p.h. limit and blows up. The passengers are saved! End of story, right? No...that pesky bomber is still hanging around. How much time is there remaining? Suddenly the time element becomes irrelevant — good-bye timelock. Ouch. Now the story has changed to an optionlock without any clear options established. The audience is unsure of the limit once the timelock has been ignored and we find ourselves with two endings. Double-Ouch!

Quick solution: since Jack gets off the bus anyway, move the material that currently happens after the bus goes boom (including the subway sequence) to before the boom. Other than a few logistical issues which could easily be addressed, the story would

flow better and the original limit would behave as promised. Jack's partner, in lieu of being blown up at Hopper's home, could replace the "maiden in distress" on the subway. That way Jack, even after Hopper's premature demise astride the subway, must return to the bus and save the day *before the time runs out*.

Slow out of the Gate

Where *Speed* suffers a conflict of limits, *Stargate* suffers from a noticeable lack of limits. As a result, the story has an aimless, lackadaisical feel to it that bores its audience every time the use of slick effects, beautiful costumes, creative camera work, and *knock-your-socks-off* set design slows down. With all of that entertainment value, how is this possible? Examine the setup.

Once the curious travelers pass through the stargate, it suddenly becomes clear to the audience that there isn't any preestablished limit on our "vacation" in exile. All we (the audience and the Main Character) know is that once through the gate we must find the way back. Is it a timelock? No. There isn't any specified limit to the amount of time we have. Is it an optionlock? Hmm, maybe. It takes a certain number of sym-

When a story has a proper storyform and decent storytelling, an audience will find the story both meaningful and entertaining.

bols to open the gate. Great — symbols can easily be interpreted as options. But wait...we already have all of the symbols except one. Worse yet, we don't even know what the missing symbol looks like or where to look for it. That's no good. To borrow from an old cliché: *One option does not an optionlock make!*

Stargate easily could have had an optionlock if a limit to the possible places to find the symbol were established. As it is, however, the symbol could be anywhere or nowhere, could be anything or nothing. Choice does not exist where there are no options (or infinite options) from which to choose. Progress cannot be determined without a direction to take.

So, we're left with a problem (find the way back through the stargate) without any clear set of parameters on how to do it. This is the reason the film seems to drag so much.

By the time a timelock *is* thrown into the story – seven minutes from the end of the movie (would you believe a ticking bomb?) — it is too late to be of much use. The issue of success and failure has been superseded by a more basic issue: survival. Too bad. Had some form of story limit, either a timelock or an optionlock, been introduced, the story would not have been so slow out of the gate and across the finish line.

Tale Gate: Unclear Obstacles Ahead

The second storyforming flaw shared by *Stargate* and *Speed* is a notable lack of clearly defined Obstacle Characters. Why is this important? In stories, the Main Character's established attitude and approach to solving problems will be called into question. Through the course of a story, an alternate problem solving paradigm will evolve. A choice then forms for the Main Character: should the Main Character remain steadfast and continue to use his familiar problem solving techniques, or should he change his ways and adopt the new, alternative paradigm? The Obstacle Character is the dramatic device that is responsible for providing the alternative paradigm. That's one reason why the Obstacle Character is important.

Additionally, the main and Obstacle Character throughlines provide a venue for audience involvement. Without the Obstacle Character it is impossible to establish a Subjective Story throughline. Without a subjective throughline, you end up following the amusement park method of storytelling where the random thrills and chills lack emotional context. Without BOTH objective and subjective throughlines, the story lacks meaning. Without all four throughlines, the story will not make the author's complete argument to the audience. In Dramatica parlance, a story that relies on a single or limited point of view from which an audience is to derive meaning is called a *tale*.

Though there is nothing inherently wrong with tales, it's a shame that *Stargate* ended up as a tale, principally because the author(s) clearly did not intend it to be that way.

Stargate largely suffers from an Obstacle Character identity crisis. Though the archeologist Daniel Jackson (played by James Spader) is the Main Character — our identification with him is only marginally successful — the team leader Colonel Jack O'Neil (played by Kurt Russell) is clearly supposed to be the Obstacle Character. But wait a minute, what alternate paradigm is O'Neil offering to Jackson? Jarhead versus Egghead? What does O'Neil's dead son have to do with all of this? And what about Jackson's newly dead wife? These events appear to be thematically related, but it's anyone's guess beyond that.

As a result, *Stargate's* main, obstacle, and subjective story throughlines are impossible to determine. This leaves us with the objective story throughline as the sole surviving point of view

The obstacle character is the dramatic device that is responsible for providing an alternative paradigm.

by which we (the audience) can glean meaning from the story. Overly emphasizing the objective story throughline with flashy storytelling, as is done in *Stargate*, largely masks the missing perspectives and is greatly responsible for making what should have been a barely palatable morsel into a tasty, holiday treat.

Speed Bumps

In *Speed*, Jack Traven (Keanu Reeves) is clearly the Main Character. His established approach to solving problems is to take hostages out of the equation by shooting them. Why is Keanu Reeves so sure of this approach? Who is responsible for challenging or undermining his certainty? Look to the Obstacle Character for answers. Who then is Jack's Obstacle Character? Is it his partner who is thrown into situations that force Jack to address his approach by shooting him in the leg? Is it Howard Payne, the mad bomber who constantly takes hostages and challenges Jack to save them or else? Is it Annie, the gutsy woman who drives the RTD bus and is put into peril not once but several times? The answer is...well, all of them...sort of.

Where *Stargate* lacks a clear Obstacle Character, *Speed* suffers from a surfeit of potential applicants. You can have more than one player represent the

Obstacle Character, though it is a tricky affair to pull it off properly. In *The Line of Fire* successfully hands-off the function of Obstacle Character from Clint Eastwood's love interest to Booth, the crazy assassin. In doing so, the perspective held by the Obstacle Character shifted from one player to the other without changing the nature of the perspective itself. With that in mind, let's examine what happens in *Speed* to determine who fills the Obstacle Character function.

Candidate #1: Jack's partner. First off, he dies and is completely out of the picture too soon for him to be an effective solo Obstacle Character (no Obi Wan-like ghostly reappearance for him). Though he *could* have been a perfect foil for Jack's "no hostages" approach, he's only used once in this capacity and that is before the story limit is even established. Verdict: Good potential not realized. This one is not the Obstacle Character.

Candidate #2: Howard Payne, the mad bomber. He takes hostages. He puts innocents at peril. He's three digits short of a dozen. Hmmm. Looks good. But wait...after the bus goes bust, his impact on Jack (at the personal level) seems to go slack. Verdict: Probably satisfies the Obstacle Character role for the first lap, but not the second. That leaves us with...

Candidate #3: Annie, Lady RTD. After escaping a fiery death on the bus, she is taken hostage by said mad bomber, dressed in explosives, and taken for a ride on the subway. Plus, she establishes the clear desire to have a relationship with Jack. Verdict: Probably satisfies the role of Obstacle Character for the second half of *Speed*.

Great. The mad bomber is the Obstacle Character for the first part of the story and it is handed-off to Annie, Jack's new love interest for the second half of the story – just like in *The Line Of Fire*. Well, not exactly.

In *Speed*, unfortunately, the two finalists for Obstacle Character don't represent the same alternate paradigms, a requirement for an effective hand-off. What we end up with are two Obstacle Characters, offering two alternative paradigms to Jack's one at

two different times in the story. But wait, there's more. This Obstacle Character difficulty not surprisingly coincides with the story's switch from timelock to optionlock.

Could this be mere coincidence? Not likely. Had the author(s) identified and corrected for *either* story-forming issue (limit or Obstacle Character), the other may not have developed improperly either. And that, dear friends, would have made a lot more of us get a bigger rush from *Speed*.



This Vampire Doesn't Reflect

According to Anne Rice, vampires *do* have reflections. And certainly, in *Interview With The Vampire*, Louis (played by Brad Pitt) does his share of reflecting. Unfortunately, he does not reflect the audience, so we end up watching him, rather than experiencing the story *through* him.

It is an interesting dilemma when a novel that relies so heavily on the internal considerations of a Main Character is translated to the screen. The charm

and identification the novel audience feels for the story grows not so much from what is being "seen" as from how they are made to see it through the eyes of the Main

Character. Filmic stories also have Main Characters, but *their* thoughts can only be experienced indirectly, through what they say and how they react.

For an audience to "tune in" to the Main Character, they must have a way of telling which dramatic points pertain to the character and which to the story at large. This is accomplished both in novel and on screen through the creation of *four* distinct throughlines or *Domains*.

The Main Character Domain provides the audience with the *first person* experience of "I" and "me." Through the eyes of the Main Character, the audience learns what it is like to actually *be* a certain kind of person.

The Obstacle Character Domain lets the audience look from the Main Character's perspective at the character that represents the principal alternative

In stories, it is perspective that generates meaning.

approach to the story's problem, who functions to pressure the Main Character to Change. Second person "You" is how the audience looks at the Obstacle Character. Notable Obstacle Characters include Obi Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*, and Sam Girard (Tommy Lee Jones) in *The Fugitive*.

The Subjective Story Domain describes the growing relationship between the Main and Obstacle Characters, creating an audience perspective of "We" (since the audience sees the relationship through the Main Character).

Finally, the Objective Story Domain provides the third person perspective, "they," to the audience. It is here the audience is able to stand outside the issues and garner a more analytical view of what the events of the story mean in context of the "big picture."

In the novel version of *Interview With The Vampire*, all four domains are fully explored. Louis is the Main Character. Lestat, his Obstacle. The Subjective story is between those two. The Objective story is the search for a higher truth of what it means to be a vampire. "They" are all concerned with this issue: Louis, Lestat, Claudia, and all the vampires in Paris (not to mention all the victims). It is against this quest that we are able to identify with Louis: to see his point of view as well as the overall scheme of things.

Unfortunately, in the film version, the Objective Story is wholly underplayed. The quest for meaning is barely visible until we finally make it to Paris. By then it is too late, for we have already established how we *feel* about our Main Character, and we do not empathize.

Early on, we *want* to step into Louis' shoes, but we cannot give ourselves over to him until we know against what background the play is to be staged. Finding no Objective story, the audience strives to construct one from spare parts. Louis' relationship with Lestat is transformed into an ersatz Objective Story and Lestat into an Antagonist, rather than an Obstacle. This is clearly evident in the feeling that the story's goal seems to be defeating Lestat, rather than learning the truth. It is simply a perspective shift, but

in stories it is perspective that generates meaning: it tells the audience how the author wants them to evaluate what they are seeing.

As a result of this audience maneuvering, there is a gap left where the Subjective Story *used* to be. As authors of their own reception, the audience again conjures up a substitute, seeking subjective growth in the relationship between Louis and Claudia. This relationship goes nowhere, however, and we are left wondering what "we" are all about in the second person plural that is supposed to be the subjective story.

"If," the audience unconsciously ponders, "the subjective story is between Louis and Claudia, then who is the Obstacle Character?" They look first to Claudia, but she does little to provide an alternative to Louis' angst. On the contrary, she suffers from the same malady and attempts to solve it in the same way. Characters do not become Obstacles because they re-enforce the Main Character's position (that is

the function of the *tempter* or *Contagonist* in the Objective story), but because they provide an alternative that tempts the Main Character to change their manner of dealing with the story's problem.

Lestat can't be the Obstacle (though he should have been) because we have already objectified him. Claudia can't be because she agrees in approach with Louis. Armand can't be because he and his dramatic influence aren't around long enough. That leaves Louis, himself.

Louis is our only choice. Out of necessity, we nominate him to the position of Obstacle. To accept the post, he must first renounce his position as Main Character. In one master stroke the audience has filled the gap created by the lack of Objective story that *was* originally present in the novel. Like a row of dominos, one domain topples after the other until we disassociate ourselves from whining Louis and look at him as "you" rather than "I."

What then of a Main Character? What meaning can the story have without one? Not much. So, we go to work one final time, latch onto the "interviewer"

For an audience to "tune in" to the Main Character, they must have a way of telling which dramatic points pertain to the character and which to the story at large.

himself and try hard to see things from *his* point of view. Who is this guy? What is his dramatic function? In the novel he is simply a dramatic device, not a player in Louis' story at all. Yet in the film, he becomes the one character with whom we identify. It's a pity that he has barely any screen time at all.

Stories are often told that leave out a whole domain (or even two!) with no ill effect. This can be accomplished by simply informing the audience of the scope of the story's exploration. Limiting the scope can free up more pages or more screen time for the domains the author is more interested in developing. The crucial flaw in the filmic *Interview* is that it suggests an objective story exists. The quest for meaning is not missing entirely from the story, just undeveloped.

Either the objective aspect of the complex novel should have been fully explored, even if only at a cursory level, or it should have been cut entirely. Leaving a few tattered pieces does not provide the audience with a richer taste, but gives them nothing to reflect on and leaves them feeling drained.



The Pagemiser

An old Zen saying cautions, "If you want to drown, don't torture yourself with shallow water." On the other hand, if you want your audience to become immersed in your story, the material must be deep enough for a swim without being over their head. For those younger than seven, chances are that *The Pagemaster* has plenty of depth. For those with a few more candles on the cake, it is very *light* indeed.

Interestingly, even though it is shallow, the storyform for *The Pagemaster* is balanced and complete. How can this seeming contradiction exist? Because *The Pagemaster* explores its issues from all sides *at a particular level of resolution*.

In Dramatica, *resolution* refers to the level of detail and nuance with which a story concept is presented to an audience. When looking at the structural side of Dramatica, we see that it is divided into four "levels." The "top" level

(called the *class* level) is the most broad stroke, containing only four Dramatica perspectives on the story's topic. This *class level* describes a resolution of story not unlike *genre* in traditional story theory. The overall feel of the story as a whole is determined by how the audience's attention is divided among the four classes. This creates a bias on the topic of the story and therefore outlines the author's stand in broad, general terms.

The next level down is the *type* level. Here, each of the four classes is subdivided into four types, providing more detail and nuance on the issue at hand. The type level is the part of the Dramatica structure most akin to the traditional understanding of plot, and therefore describes the types of activities the story's characters engage in, and the areas of their concern.

Third among the levels of increasing resolution are the *variations*. It is here that the thematic issues of a story are expressed by playing each thematic point against its counterpoint until a rich pattern of meaning has been created.

The final depth of Dramatica structure brings us to the *element* level. These elements are the essential building blocks of character. As such, complex characters and their complex relationships will be fashioned at the element level.

Taking it all together, the Dramatica structure has four levels that represent the primary components of genre, plot, theme, and character, respectively. *Grand Argument* stories go all the way to the bottom, exploring an issue from the first level of four classes all the way down to the sixty-four elements beneath each class. In essence, these four levels of resolution allow an author to explore an issue as deeply as it can be examined without losing sight of the issue itself.

"If you want to drown, don't torture yourself with shallow water."

Children's stories, however, often do not carry a topic to that depth since most children have not had enough experi-

ence to "recognize" differences in meaning much beyond the "type" level. In Dramatica, this technique is called "slicing," as it describes a storyform that limits itself to fewer than the four available levels. In

a sense, it is much like pulling apart a four-layer cake and making a two or three level cake instead, discarding the unused portion. If each layer has a different “flavor” (a la genre, plot, theme, and character), then the new confection will appeal to a less sophisticated palate.

In *The Pagemaster*, the authors chose to limit the story to the class and type levels, meaning that the resulting work is primarily confined to genre and

plot, leaving theme and character largely undeveloped. In fact, the characters are not true characters in the Dramatica sense, but represent the genres of “Adventure,” “Fantasy,” and “Horror.” There is no more depth to them than that, save for inventive “business” or dialog, which is really only window dressing in this instance. Still and all, the genres of the film are fully explored (“Adventure” is based on activity in the Physics class, “Fantasy” pertains to letting one’s thought wander in the Psychology class, “Horror” reflects the situation in the Universe Class). The fourth class, Mind, is carried by the young boy, Richard, himself, whose attitude about danger and risk is what must be changed.

At the type level, we can clearly follow the story as it explores *learning, understanding, doing, and obtaining* in one genre (Adventure), *being, becoming, conceiving, and conceptualizing* in another (Fantasy), *past, present, future, and progress* in the third (Horror), and *memory, subconscious, conscious, and preconscious* responses in the last (the boy).

This is what makes the story complete: that it fully explores the topic from *all* appropriate perspectives at the two most broad levels of resolution. Yet, since it limits itself to these two top levels, the story seems simple and shallow. There are practically no thematic considerations at all and certainly no complex character development.

For the unsophisticated viewer, this is plenty. But for the adults who accompany them, there is precious little. This causes a significant problem in terms of Reception Theory. To paraphrase Shakespeare, “Above all, know thy audience.” The creators of *The Pagemaster* appear to have been think-

ing of the audience as the world of children, neglecting to consider the parents who must accompany the audience to the theater. By catering to one at the expense of the other, word of mouth gets out that there’s not much to see and box office diminishes proportionately.

A better approach is to create a *complete* story-form that examines the issue at *all* levels of sophistication so there is something for everyone.

The Pagemaster could have widened its audience appeal with a few additional pages the authors seemed to have missed. Why not draw a direct parallel between the three “tests” that our young hero encounters in the “fictional” world and the problems he left behind in the real world. Surely, his climb up the cliff is already intended to tie in with his fear of climbing the ladder to the tree house his dad built. But when it comes to the Jeekyll & Hyde sequence, or the ocean excursion (including Long John Silver), there is no comparable counterpart back in suburbia where he can apply what he learns.

Yes, he manages to grow some courage, but that alone is simply the central issue he must ultimately address. By drawing comparisons between his real life and the dangers he faces in storyland, the same *contributing* factors that collectively generate his fear can be examined in two different contexts. Point and counterpoint: the very essence of a thematic argument. Jeekyll and Hyde might represent an older brother: friend at one moment, foe the next. Long John Silver might be the local bully, holding the keys to a treasure that doesn’t really exist. This approach (as tired as it is) would still have expanded the story’s resolution downward, bringing another level of sophistication to the film that adult audiences could appreciate with much greater interest.

Of course, there are other issues that plague *The Pagemaster*, such as why a knowledgeable, fact-wielding boy who lives for statistics *doesn’t have a library card!* Or, why, when he is asked by the books if he is adventure or fantasy, he says, “I’m a real boy,” rather than, “I’m nonfiction,” which would have been more consistent. Still, it is the missing depth to *The*

***This is what makes the story complete:
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Pagemaster which is its greatest drawback and also the area in which we can learn the most in dealing with split-level audiences.

To summarize: when children are part of the audience it is important to *weave* the story points together in such a way that both simple and complex concepts are spread evenly throughout the work. Otherwise, children may experience great deserts of incomprehensible material between the lower resolution topics and/or adults may find themselves bored by periods shallow material.

When creating a story solely for adults, the top layers of the cake are often cut off, rather than the bottom. This provides all of the complex issues, while throwing it out of context and forcing the audience to “figure out” how it should be taken. Through clever storytelling, the class and type levels can be inferred without being actually described, providing the sophisticated audience with an entertaining guessing game as well as a deep message.

In short, know your audience and make sure you provide resolution shallow enough to immerse them without drowning, yet deep enough to keep the story afloat.



Generations Loss

Reception is an area of story theory that deals with the way an audience interprets and reacts to the symbols and images it receives from the author through the medium of expression. Fancy Schmancy! Yet, beneath those pompous words lies a truly valuable concept: you, the author, are *not* your audience. Sure, we all like to identify with our audience, but it is much more important to *identify* your audience - not just who they are, but from what direction they come to your story.

More often than not, the reasons we create a work are different from the reasons others want to see it. We might want to make a political statement, increase public awareness of an issue important to us, share a special moment from our lives, or just make oodles of money.

Identify your audience - not just who they are, but from what direction they come to your story.

It is unlikely that our audience would plop down their hard-earned bucks for any of these reasons. Rather, the audience wants to be *entertained*. They also want to pick up *information*, become involved in serious *drama*, and brighten their world through *comedy*. One or more of these things are true for all stories, but for sequels or stories involving well-known characters (such as James Bond or Sherlock Holmes), and for stories made by well known artists (writers, directors, or actors), the audience carries with it both preconceptions and expectations based on their experiences *prior* to the closed world of the story itself.

Many stories are told that *depend on* a certain level of audience experience, such as in *The Mask*, where previous awareness of *Looney Tunes* cartoons is crucial to full enjoyment of the story. Sometimes, storytellers expect the audience to bring too much to the story. A case in point is the original *Star Trek - The Motion Picture*, in which the filmmakers clearly felt that the audience so loved the Enterprise that they would be transfixed by lethargic minutes devoted to examining every inch of the outside of the starship as Captain Kirk prepares to board.

Other times, in their attempt to fashion a cohesive story that stands on its own two feet, authors forget about the relationships the audience carries into the story with them. This can lead to disappointment and even alienation between the writer and those she most hopes to affect. A current example of this oversight is clearly evident in *Star Trek - Generations* in the manner in which Captain Kirk is brought to the end of his career.

By the tone of the motion picture’s pre-release publicity, it was clearly the intent of the producers that *Generations* was to serve as a “passing of the torch” between Kirk and Picard. In fact, the entire story was fashioned to accomplish this one primary task. Unfortunately, that is not why the audience came to the theater.

For almost a third of a century, audience members had come to know Kirk as a friend. Through his eyes as Main Character, they

Storytelling Tips

Breathing Life Into Your Appreciations

by Mark Haslett

Your first look at a Storyform can be baffling. “This is my story?” you ask yourself, holding your Story Engine Settings report close to your face. “What have I done!?” Obviously, there is a long distance between having completed a Storyform and having written a story. Even when you know that each dramatic appreciation in the Story Engine is set the way you want, it can still be hard to imagine the steps needed to bring those appreciations to life. In this article, I would like to suggest some ways for getting to know your Storyform.

A Storyform is a listing of the dramatic appreciations that work together to create the emotional and rational arguments of a story. The appreciations are specific sites of meaning in a story that calibrate and guide the direction of a story’s emotional and rational arguments. One can look at a Storyform as the skeleton or the dehydrated arguments at work inside of any particular story. They are what you would see if you could look underneath all the storytelling and gloss.

Perhaps the first thing you notice about Dramatica appreciations as they appear in the reports is that they have no specific context. Creating the context in which you will present them is the work of writing a story. It is from the combination of appreciation and context that audiences receive meaning in stories, and until you can imagine the appreciations of your Dramatica Storyform in a particular light, you won’t really know if you have the right Storyform.

Even a strong vision of one of the four story throughlines may not be enough to give you concrete ideas of how to illustrate appreciations from the other sides. “What is a Subjective Story Stipulation of Conceptualizing? How do I write from that?” These are reasonable questions and they have to be answered before Dramatica really becomes of use to the writer who asks them. Fortunately, these questions actually lead somewhere good.

A technique for getting hold of your story’s appreciations and playing with them in your hands, so to speak, is to write “Context examples” for each of them. Set aside the goal of illustrating your particular story and write any example that comes to mind. Go wherever your mind takes you, as long as your examples illustrate the appreciation. This way you can get inside an appreciation, look around, and hopefully find sparks that will connect your appreciations to the story you want to write.

To write Context examples, you need two things. First you need to know what the appreciation in general means, i.e. what is a Subjective Story Stipulation? or a Main Character Unique Ability?

Appreciations:

Commonly shared Dramatic Concepts • Appreciations are items of dramatic meaning that are common to all stories. When a person attempts to deal with troubles, certain considerations and perspectives are commonly adopted; *goals*, for example, *requirements*, and *consequences*. Stories, which represent analogies to this problem solving process, also incorporate these items. In Dramatica, these shared considerations are referred to as *appreciations*.

Examples:

- The Objective Story *Domain* — the broadest definition of where the problem lies in the Objective Story.
- The Main Character *Stipulation* — the measurement towards which the Main Character looks in order to gauge progress.
- The Subjective Story *Concern* — the area of concern between the Main and Obstacle Characters.

Terms:

Words from the structural model of Dramatica which are defined by their relationship to one another. Terms fall into four categories: Classes, Types, Variations, and Elements. Their meanings define the variety of ways in which appreciations can appear. When a term is matched with an appreciation, it describes the nature of how that appreciation will develop in the storyform it is a part of.

Examples:

- Universe [*Class*] • A situation • *The Universe Class is where any fixed state of affairs is explored, such as an institution, system or situation that remains stable and unchanging.*
- Past [*Type*] • What has already happened • *The Past is not unchanging. Often we learn new things which change our understanding of what past events truly meant and create new appreciations of how things re-*

There are descriptions of all of the appreciations in the Dramatica support materials such as the *Dramatica Dictionary* and the *Topic, Background, and Definition* buttons in the Dramatica Query System of the program itself. A little reading on each appreciation will answer a lot of questions. It is important to see what “part” of the story each appreciation is meant to capture and to hold fast to that perspective. Caution: Do not blend any of the perspectives — like those of the Main Character and the Objective Story, for example. All four throughlines must be kept independent when one is identifying or illustrating the appreciations which make them up.

But grasping that is only half of what you need in order to write context examples. You also need to know precisely what Dramatica means by the term that describes how a particular appreciation will appear in your story. For example, what does “Being” mean in Dramatica? The terms are used quite specifically, with definite boundaries to their meanings. When “Morality” appears as a term in your Storyform, it is intended to mean specifically the concept of doing for others without concern for yourself. Connotations and other baggage which a term might be carrying from its usage in regular conversation should be banished from your mind while looking at your Storyform. People are almost never as precise with their language as Dramatica has to be. Knowing what a term does and does not mean is fundamental to seeing how an appreciation can be properly illustrated.

Armed and ready then, with your Story Engine Settings report, your Dramatica books, and having set aside any notes from the actual story you are writing, you may begin jotting down contexts. Each one should represent a way in which these dramatic meanings could conceivably be presented.

When beginning, it will be easiest to write illustrations for the contexts that make the most sense to you. That way the ideas will start flowing and you will feel progress right off the bat. There are pre-written context examples available in the Dramatica Query System for virtually every appreciation. These will help demonstrate the limits of what is and what isn't a context example. Looking at these might prepare you to write examples for the appreciations which you find to be the most obscure.

Toward this same purpose, we have written other Context examples below to help you gather all the right strings in your hands when you do it yourself. The more examples you come up with for each appreciation, the more prepared you will be when you return to writing your story. In a way, your story will seem to restrict you at that point because of the choices that you have made about how to encode your storyform. In writing the appreciations into your story, you will have to string them together so they describe and develop

ally fit together. A Story that focuses on the Past may be much more than a documentation of what happened. Frequently it is a reevaluation of the meaning of what has occurred that can lead to changing one's understanding of what is happening in the present or will eventually happen in the future.

Context:

Taking an appreciation which has been matched with a term and describing how it will be seen in terms of the “real” world of the audience. Context supplies the specifics of how an appreciation will be communicated to an audience.

Examples:

- Objective Story Domain of Universe: *All of the Objective Characters are concerned with maintaining or demolishing a situation. For example, a country under the thumb of an authoritarian dictator; the condition of a dysfunctional family; a utopian society; a submarine trapped under the ice; progress in one-sided relationships; a murder that occurred 30 years ago; the future of gay rights; the forces that bring on an ice age; etc.*
- Main Character Stipulation of Past: *The exploration of events or occurrences in the past that indicate the degree of the Main Character's central concern. For example, what a daughter discovers about her father to determine whether he was actually a Nazi sympathizer; what a boy is able to trace about his family background to see if it is actually of royal lineage; etc.*

Continued ➡

your story's throughlines. Becoming familiar with your appreciations will help you develop control and nuance in the way you weave them together into the tapestry that will be your story.

This exercise should feel a bit like taking a doll and bending its limbs around to see how much it can do. Can its elbows move? Can you spin the arms all the way around or only part way? Appreciations have their limits, that is what gives them the potential for meaning. Context examples have to describe those limits, capturing the essence of both the appreciation and the term that describes its nature.

Examples:

There are four perspectives in every story, each with its own throughline of appreciations in Dramatica. These are the Objective Story, the Subjective Story, the Main Character and the Objective Character. The appreciations of a Storyform are strung along these four throughlines and end up fully exploring all four perspectives.

The structural terms, which become matched to these appreciations by choices which you make in Dramatica, can be seen in four levels of resolution. There are four terms on the Class level, 16 terms on the Type level, 64 terms on the Variation level, and 64 terms on the Element level. So you can see that a large number of potential appreciations exists. But appreciations all have structural coordinates relating their particular level, structurally, and their specific throughline, dynamically.

In the following examples, all four throughlines and all four structural levels will be represented. (Look at the structural charts in the back of the Theory book to see a full representation of all the terms and their relationships.) Again, more examples are available in the Dramatica program itself by using the "Context" button in the Dramatica Query System.

Objective Story Domain: Mind as the Objective Story Domain— All of the Objective Characters are concerned with a fixed aspect of the mind. For example, a city of people committed to not complying with a law voted in by the rest of the country; a corps of engineers determined to build their bridge over a stubborn shepherd's watering hole; a U.S. President's conviction to continue campaigning, even

though an assassin is gunning for him, throws the secret service into a panic; a crooked cop's complete focus on killing anyone who can finger him puts in danger a community of Amish people who are committed to nonviolent protection of a witness; etc.

Subjective Story Stipulation: Conceiving as the Subjective Story Stipulation—The invention of ideas that indicate the degree of progress in the Subjective Story. For example, a prisoner of war and his guard coming up with ideas together of how to spend their time in the prison; a father's Conceiving of ideas for comic-book stories to give his daughter who started drawing comics against his will; a pair of lovers Conceiving of different ways they will spend their retirement; etc.

Main Character Unique Ability: Reappraisal as the Main Character Unique Ability— Reappraisal is the quality that makes the Main character uniquely able to counter the effects caused by the story's problem. For example, a scientist's Reappraisals of the conditions surrounding a dangerous experiment allow him to constantly adjust his own work so the whole thing doesn't blow up in his face; a comedienne's Reappraisal of world events allows her to keep her improvisation timely and effective as her massive success threatens to make her irrelevant; an airplane mechanic's Reappraisal of the remains from a plane crash allows him to motivate the crash survivors to rebuild the plane and fly to safety; a boxer's Reappraisal of his opponents at the beginning of each round allows him to approach them with the attack most appropriate for the moment and win all of his fights; etc.

Obstacle Character Focus: Control as the Obstacle Character Focus— The Obstacle Character's attention is focused on Control. For example, a samurai warrior focuses on what he feels is the excessive control a religious leader has over her followers; a movie director focuses on the lack of control he has over his lead actor's performance; a detective focuses on a mother's control over her son who, if he were allowed to come forward, could help him convict a criminal; a squadron leader focuses on the Control his best pilot has over the morale of the squadron; etc.

Each of these examples contains the meanings of the appreciation they illustrate. They still do not

constitute a story, but they certainly point the direction which the story will take. After writing a number of these, you will get a feeling for the *size* of an appreciation and for what it will take to weave them together in a storyform.

Eventually, you will have to return to writing your own story. Once you feel you have the idea behind each appreciation in your Storyform, it becomes time to write illustrations of them that fit with the specifics of your story. How is "Reappraisal" *your* Main Character's Unique Ability? How and when will it appear in *your* story? These illustrations for your story (which can be written in the Storytelling windows of Dramatica) will provide the proverbial 3x5 cards and notes-on-the-back-of-paper-napkins that authors often call upon to push them through from scene to scene. This kind of preparation will make your Storyform truly your own. When it is familiar and well-explored, your Storyform will become a valuable map for your story, giving you directions on how to "get-there-from-here" without saying how fast you have to drive or what kind of transportation you have to take. ❖

Dramatica Deep Theory Discussion Group

Do you think you understand everything there is to know about Dramatica? Guess again! If you have taken the Dramatica Basics class as well as all eight of our focus workshops (which qualifies you as either an expert or a groupie) you qualify to attend the DEEP theory Discussion Groups.

These evening get-togethers are free-form, informal, round table explorations into the abyss at the heart of Dramatica. Do you have questions or answers that make your friends' eyes roll up in their heads? Then join us once a month to share your insight and be part of the cutting edge of developing Dramatica theory!

Dramatica Deep Theory Discussion Group meets every third Thursday of the month (including Jan. 19, Feb. 16, Mar. 16, Apr. 20) at 7:00 pm in the offices of Screenplay Systems, Burbank. ❖

Free Workshops *(from page 2)*

- Eight different two-hour Focus workshops. These focus workshops are held on eight consecutive Tuesday nights on the following topics: Storyforming/Appreciations, Characters, Storyencoding, Plot, Theme, Storyweaving, Genre, and Story Reception.
- The workshops are open to everyone interested. Tell your friends.
- Space is limited and is on a first come/first served basis. Dramatica software owners have preferred seating over non-owners.
- Attendance of the Saturday Dramatica BASICS workshop is still a strongly suggested prerequisite for attending the Tuesday night focus workshops.

WHERE: The Workshops are held at the offices of *Screenplay Systems, 150 East Olive Avenue, Suite 203, Burbank, California, 91502*. The nearest cross street is San Fernando Road. There is plenty of free parking available.

RESERVATIONS ARE RECOMMENDED. Space is extremely limited. Dramatica clients have preferential seating.

Call (818) 843-6557 ext. 532 to make workshop reservations or to obtain additional class information.

For a complete schedule, look to the Dramatica Calendar on the back cover of this issue. ❖

Dramatica Internet Address

Questions, comments, reactions, and subscriptions to this newsletter and Dramatica can be sent to us from most computer services via our Internet address:

Dramatica@Screenplay.com

Holiday "Fair" (Continued from page 9)

had experienced *entertainment*, gathered *information*, struggled through difficult *dramas*, and rejoiced in innumerable *comedic* moments. They did not come to see him "pass the torch"; they came to see him get his reward.

A gold watch is not enough for Kirk, because it is not enough for us. And one final adventure doesn't make it either. No, we've thrilled, and learned, and contemplated, and laughed with Kirk for thirty years. Now was our chance to be rewarded for remaining true and noble to the end. And what did we (the audience) get instead? A world where all of our dreams finally could come true, only to find it brought us no fulfillment, followed by a meaningless death (that comes after we have saved the situation) on a barren planet, unseen by cheering crowds, and virtually alone. In *Star Trek V*, Kirk says he knows he'll die alone. We expect that. But separated from all those who might care by time as well as space? Some reward!

So how might the same valid story have been told, accomplished the prerequisite "passing of the torch" and *still* satisfied the legions of loyal fans? For a hint, lets look back at the first Star Wars film. Here the ending was designed to put us in front of the crowd as heroes, basking in the glory of having done the right thing and lived to tell about it. But even then, an oversight led to a short protest movement. No sooner had the film debuted but bumper stickers and buttons began to appear demanding, "Give Chewy a medal!" In the excitement of the closing scene, Chewbacca was the only member of the "team" that was not presented with a token of esteem. A silly little medal would have done it.

In *Generations* the solution was even easier and vastly more meaningful. To set up the scene: Kirk, in saving the new Enterprise from destruction is sucked out into space. Picard is later sucked into a time vortex where dreams become reality. There he finds Kirk and attempts to enlist him in the battle against a madman.

At first, Kirk is reluctant because he finds in this world everything he ever lost by thinking first of his career. Yet five minutes later, he is tired of it all because "none of this is real." Five minutes? What kind of a reward is that! Give Kirk a medal! Not really a medal, after all, he has hundreds of those already. What he doesn't have is personal fulfillment for the soldier/philosopher emeritus. The reward Kirk needed was those eighty years he spent

In their attempt to fashion a cohesive story that stands on its own two feet, authors frequently forget about the relationships the audience carries into the story with them

in the vortex not to be only five minutes, but the full eighty years - a whole second lifetime to do things right: a chance to literally make up for lost time.

Instead of Kirk telling Picard that he had just arrived a few moments ago, he should have told Picard that he had been there for eighty years, being young, being old, resurrecting lost loves, enjoying the life he never had. At first he is reluctant to leave (who wouldn't be?) But then, like an old firedog, he catches the scent of adventure. In the dream world of the vortex you can rewrite anything that you ever regretted - BUT only things that already happened to you. Life is great without a career, but Kirk hasn't had a *real* adventure in eighty years. To cheat death, to save the universe... to sleep, perchance to dream. Wake-up call!!!

Kirk agrees to go with Picard (two lifetimes are enough) and joins in a "private" battle away from the spotlight and just for the fun of it. In the end, dying with your boots on is its own reward.

Reception theory: a lot of academic mumbo-jumbo. Forget about it and lose your audience.



That wraps up Dramatica's holiday gift to all our subscribers. But before we embark on a new year of exploration into the true meaning of story, Chris and Melanie would like to close out the season with something we wrote ten years ago, when things looked a lot more bleak than they turned out to be.

Happy holidays from the Dramatica Team and all of us at Screenplay Systems! ❖

The Day After Christmas

by Melanie Anne Phillips and Chris Huntley

'Twas the Day After Christmas
And all through the house,
Not a creature was living
Not even a mouse.

The children were hung
By the chimney with care,
To spare them the horrors
Their parents would bear.

The day before Christmas
The warning had come:
The bombers were airborne,
The WAR had begun.

Our Christmas eve dinner
Was silent with dread,
While visions of Atom bombs
Danced in our heads.



We toasted, "The End"
with a potent nightcap
While the world settled down
For its long, final nap.

Suddenly - Outside the house
There occurred the explosion
That set all of mankind's
Demise into motion.

The panes of the windows
Blew in with a crash,
Tore open the shutters
Revealing the flash.

I saw, to my horror,
The gray, ashy snow
That buried the bodies
That lay down below.

Then what to my watering
Eyes should appear,
But a nightmare in red,
His intent all too clear.

He seemed so obsessed
That it could be no fluke.
I knew in a moment
It must be Saint Nuke.



And perched 'top his coursers
Of thundering flame,
He fondled his missiles
And called them by name:

"Now Helmut, Now Thatcher,
Khomeini, and Reagan.
On Castro, Chernenko,
Kadafi, and Begin.

"The land we shall scorch
With a great fireball.
So blast away, blast away,
Blast away all!"

As bodies before
A great holocaust fly,
When hitting a wall
And are thrown to the sky,

So up to the housetop,
The missiles they flew,
Saint Nuke at the reins
of his great Pershing II.

As I covered my head,
Barely stumbling aside,
He blew off the rooftop
And tumbled inside.

He was dressed all in lead,
From his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all glowing
With 50 rad soot.

From his smoldering coat,
Formed a small mushroom cloud,
And the smoke it encircled
His head like a shroud.

He hadn't a face,
But the hair on his belly,
Fell out when he laughed
As his flesh turned to jelly.

He reached in his S.A.C.,
But the presents were scrambled,
(And so was our future,
his presence preambled).

He spoke not a word
But went straight to his work
And demolished the house.
Turning round in the murk,

The look in his eye
And the twist of his head,
Gave me to know that
I soon would be dead.

He sprang to the air,
And ignited a missile;
Away we all blew
Like the down of a thistle.

But I heard him exclaim,
In the moment I died,
"On the Day After Christmas,
There's nowhere to hide!"



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Dramatica Newsletter - Dated Material

1995 Dramatica Calendar

JANUARY

Sat, Jan. 7 **Basics Workshop**
Tue, Jan. 10 Focus on Storyforming
Wed, Jan. 11 *User's Group*
Tue, Jan. 17 Focus on Character
Thr, Jan. 19 *Deep Theory Group*
Tue, Jan. 24 Focus on Storyencoding
Tue, Jan. 31 Focus on Plot

FEBRUARY

Sat, Feb. 4 **Basics Workshop**
Tue, Feb. 7 Focus on Theme
Wed, Feb. 8 *User's Group*
Tue, Feb. 14 Focus on Storyweaving
Thr, Feb. 16 *Deep Theory Group*
Tue, Feb. 21 Focus on Genre
Tue, Feb. 28 Focus on Reception

MARCH

Sat, Mar. 4 **Basics Workshop**
Tue, Mar. 7 Focus on Storyforming
Wed, Mar. 8 *User's Group*
Tue, Mar. 14 Focus on Character
Thr, Mar. 16 *Deep Theory Group*
Tue, Mar. 21 Focus on Storyencoding
Tue, Mar. 28 Focus on Plot

APRIL

Sat, Apr. 1 **Basics Workshop**
Tue, Apr. 4 Focus on Theme
Tue, Apr. 11 Focus on Storyweaving
Wed, Apr. 12 *User's Group*
Tue, Apr. 18 Focus on Genre
Thr, Apr. 20 *Deep Theory Group*
Tue, Apr. 25 Focus on Reception

For Workshop Reservations, call (818) 843-6557 ext. 532 • Space is Limited