Constructive Criticism: "The Hot Zone" & "Outbreak"

by Melanie Anne Phillips & Chris Huntley

Zoned Out

There is a **virus** loose among us. It undermines our natural defenses and leaves us vulnerable to attack from infectious agents. There is no known cure. It is not Aids. It is not Marburg or Ebola. It is propaganda.

Like any good virus, you can't see it, smell it, or taste it when it enters your system. It gives no clue while it incubates. In fact, even when the symptoms appear you ascribe them to some more common and harmless malady. This gives the virus a chance to multiply while it searches for its next host. Before you succumb, you will likely have infected many others. An epidemic is born.

Outbreak is the movie that was made. The Hot Zone is the book that almost was a movie. We're going to put them both under the microscope to see why the book is like an inoculation while the movie is like a live virus.

As a first step in classifying our specimens, let's eyeball them to get a feel for their macroscopic nature.

By this observation it is evident that both samples fall into the category of *thrillers*. Since truly dangerous **viruses** are rare, many analysts sniff the sample as a preliminary means of determination. From this test it is clear that neither of them stinks.

THE "HOT" SHEET

Story	**Virus**
Character	**Agent**
Player	**Cell**
Manipulation	**Innoculation**
Propaganda	**Infection**

Next we examine their respective *messages* and it is here we discover the key that makes one a booster and the other a Trojan horse. The Hot Zone is a biased documentary contending that Ebola is more than a virus; in fact, it is best likened to a predator, and we, its prey. Outbreak is a fiction purporting that "The Military" would have a fictional virus (similar to

Inside this Issue:

How to Adapt Adeptly

"Read the book; see the movie!" "Now a major motion picture!" "A novelization…" "A new musical based on the stage play…" "…based on the book…" "…based on the hit movie!" "The timeless story of…" "…a classic tale…" "…updated for today's audience…" "…colorized…" "…re-formatted to fit your screen…" "…edited for television."

It's the same old story. Or is it? Is a story really the same when translated from one medium to another and if not, how is it different? What qualities must remain unchanged for a story to maintain its identity? Conversely, what qualities *must* be changed to maintain a story's integrity? To adapt adeptly an author

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"Who Ya Gonna Call?"

by Duchess Dale

Recently, Screenplay Systems, Inc., announced that Sandy Stone & Vito Montone of *Stone & Montone Consultants* and David Knell & Mark Harrison, who make up the team, *Storysmiths™* have been trained in the Dramatica theory and certified as independent story consultants (phone numbers on page 2).

I recently met with *Storysmiths™*, David Knell & Mark Harrison, to find out exactly what it is they do.

Q: **First of all, what do you do as Dramatica consultants?**

MH: *The short answer is that we work with writers, directors, and producers, to make their stories better.*

Q: **What was involved in the certification process?**

DK: *It was a fairly intensive couple of months, which dealt with the specifics of applying the Dramatica theory to script analysis and creation.*

Q: **Let's say, I've got a completed story that I think has some problem areas. How would you help me if I came to you?**

DK: *Unlike traditional story consultants, we don't impose our opinions onto you, telling you what we think is wrong with your story or how to improve it.*

MH: *We'll ask questions about what impact you want the story to have, if there are any scenes you think really exemplify that idea, which parts may be your favorites, etc.*

DK: *This helps us lock-in on what aspects of the process are most important to the author—where your passion lies.*

MH: *Right. Then we use Dramatica to show you where you might be undermining yourself by making storytelling choices that are incompatible with the ideas you want to communicate.*

DK: *If you want to have some impact on your audience, you want to make sure that the story your heart wants to tell is consistent with the story that comes from your head.*

Q: **That brings up an interesting point. I've read the current article in the WGA Journal about the "Story Gurus" all of whom claim to do pretty much the same thing. Where do you fit in with them?**

MH: *We do something completely different.*

DK: *"Story Gurus" are just that: wise individuals who share their knowledge and opinions about story. In contrast, Dramatica is not someone's opinion, but a fully-developed theory of story.*

MH: *By asking multiple choice questions about the dramatics of your story, Dramatica presents you with all of the elements and perspectives that will be necessary to communicate your ideas, as well as showing you the order in which they ought to be presented.*

Q: **How does Dramatica do that?**

DK: *Magic.*

MH: *Truly. The heart of the software is the Dramatica Story Engine. It's a remarkable bit of computer engineering that's sort of a cross between a Rubik's Cube™ and a periodic table of story elements.*

Q: **Can't I just use Dramatica to do all of this for myself?**

MH: *We all have certain blind spots. Certain elements of thinking or behavior of which we're not personally aware. That's why it always seems so much easier to solve other people's problems than our own. And if your main character is someone you, as the author, identify with, you may not be able to discern their blind spots either.*

DK: *We can help by trying out different scenarios, change different elements, and explaining what impact those changes will have on the whole. With that kind of feedback you'll be able to fill those holes before the audience and the critics point out where you went wrong.*

MH: *Also, the definitions and terms used in the story engine are extremely precise, but the learning curve is huge.*

DK: *It's more of a learning Alp.*

MH: *We're constantly learning about the subtleties involved in the theory. A lot of people don't have the time, patience, or inclination to delve that deeply. But we've done the delving...*

DK: *...and pass the savings on to you.*

Q: **Great. One last question. Do you guys do windows?**

(Duchess Dale is a writer/director, and neophyte Dramatica user.) ❖

Zoned Out *(page 1)*

Ebola) under control, if not for its predatory desire for a perfect biological weapon. Same victims. Different Villain. Different message. Different impact.

Having concluded our sensory inspection, we put on our pressure suits and enter the Dramatica Analysis Unit. Here we find much more sophisticated tools to help us unravel the genetic codes of a harbinger and a killer.

Our initial procedure is to place our samples in the centrifuge and separate the Objective Characters from the Subjective Characters, so they can be studied independently.

Objective Characters in any **story virus** are defined by their functions, which remain consistent while the **virus** works. In fact, these components define the *mechanism* or nature of the virus, which determines its modus operandi. Some common Objective Characters are the Protagonist agent, the Antagonist agent, and the infamous *Contagonist* agent (first isolated and classified by the Dramatica Analysis Team itself).

In contrast, Subjective Characters are *dynamic* viral agents, which mutate the longer the **virus** works. They adapt to the specific conditions they encounter and alter their natures, either to become more firmly what they started out to be or to change into something else altogether. The Subjective Character agents are the Main Character and the Obstacle Character: the two most visible growth bodies in a **propaganda virus**. An interesting note is that when one of these two growth agents *changes*, the other will remain *steadfast*.

Stopping the centrifuge, we find that we have stratified the Objective and Subjective Characters into separate layers. In a functioning **virus**, these two kinds of agents often co-habitate in the same cell or *player*.

In the early days of story analysis, theorists did not have tools sophisticated enough to look deeply into the player and tried to understand the workings of a story at a player level of resolution. This led to the mistaken classification of a "hero" cell. Supposedly, the hero cell would remain resolute in its function, yet grow at the same time.

Clearly, this paradox did not describe what was really going on inside the **virus**, leaving much of the nature of characters shrouded in mystery. Because of this, many other subclassifications were created to explain these seemingly random actions by the hero cell, such as the *antihero*, the *unwilling* hero, and the *confused* hero cell. As one might expect, such classifications were not only ham-handed for analysis, but

practically useless in genetically engineering *original* **viruses** with any kind of finesse.

Fortunately, the discovery of a player who could contain either an Objective Character, a Subjective Character, *both*, or *neither*, led to a much more precise description of the way a **virus** really *works*.

Players with only an Objective function simply fulfill a function in the plot of the propaganda virus (and in fact, in stories in general). Players with only a Subjective aspect provide insight into the growth of the **virus** into a new form. Players with both Objective and Subjective aspects do double duty which can sometimes lead a player cell to rupture, unless its two functions are kept relatively compatible. Finally, there are players without *any* Objective or Subjective aspects. These are there simply as a *growth medium*, providing a convenient resource that does not directly affect the impact or mechanism of the virus.

In the Outbreak sample, the Main Character is easily identified. It is Sam, played by Dustin Hoffman. This cell does double duty insofar as the Hoffman player also contains the Objective function of the Protagonist. In Outbreak's mechanism, the Objective Character in the Sam cell is out to stop the killer virus. Sam never grows in this regard. He is out to help people and simply *does that* until he wins or he loses.

The Sam cell's Subjective growth is a little harder to see. This growth will determine if Sam maintains his identity or changes into something new, perhaps for the better, perhaps for the worse.

What growth do we see? There is ample opportunity for growth, even if only to become more steadfast. First, there is his relationship with another cell: compatriot biologist, Robbie (his recently ex wife). He loves her, though, she no longer loves him because he is too dedicated to his job and never had time for the two of them.

This might be how he grows: by maintaining his love until *she* changes and realizes that she loves him *because* of his dedication, and becomes blissfully happy to see him only once a week. This seems most like what happened on screen. Yet the resolution to this conflict was never made explicit, leaving us to wonder what happens when things get back to normal and once again he's never around? Presented in the manner it was, that's a pretty lame message.

Let's look for another candidate for growth in the Outbreak **virus** that might indicate a different message. We might believe Sam, himself, has changed. What would indicate that? He takes off his helmet to show how much he loves his ex. Clearly he has

violated the rules he lives by. Is that not a change? Well, it might have been, but he is portrayed throughout the story as one who never follows rules very well. There is even a scene in which he forgets to check his suit and another character has to bring a dangerous rip to his attention.

No, taking off his helmet must just be his way of showing Robbie, "I love you more than life itself, so I'll kill myself for no good reason." By that time he *knew* his anti-virus was going to work, so it was probably just grandstanding rather than being a truly meaningful gesture. Not much growth there either.

Growth is a comparison between the way things started out and the way they ended up. For the helmet gag to have worked, Sam would have had to have been fastidiously careful every step of the way, so that violating his own code would be seen as a change. In addition, the gesture would have meant so much more if initial tests of his serum had indicated failure. Only *after* he removed the helmet should he have discovered his gesture of love would not cost him his life. To the Robbie cell, this would have been ample reason to determine this guy was worth keeping.

The Dramatica Analysis Team had previously documented the same kind of behavior in a Little House On The Prairie **virus**. An orphaned brother and sister were to be split up by a couple who wished to adopt the girl, but not the boy who could not talk. The boy runs away and is cared for by a loving old man. Just as the parent cells take the girl cell away, the boy turns to the old man and says, "I love you." He can talk! The overjoyed parents now decide they want him too. Happy ending? Not hardly. The parents learned nothing from the old man. It would have been so much more meaningful if the parent cells had seen the love in the boy for his sister cell and changed to wanting them both. *Then* the boy tells the old man, "I love you," which would have been the author's proof that the parents made the right decision. Alas, it had all the right building blocks yet turned out to be just another nonviable **virus**.

Returning to the Outbreak **virus**, we consider that perhaps the Sam/Robbie interaction is not the primary relationship of this story. Sam is clearly the Main Character agent, but might there be an Obstacle cell we had not uncovered? How about General Ford, Sam's superior officer? He changes, doesn't he? Well, yes, he does. He mutates from self-interest to morality, driven by Sam's unceasing dedication to the Hippocratic oath. From hypocrite to Hippocratic…that's General Ford!

Following the logic of our analysis, if Sam is the Main Character and remains steadfast and General Ford changes, then Ford must be the Obstacle Character cell. We can see a Subjective Story *growing* between Sam and Ford. Each puts more and more pressure on the other until, in the end, one of them changes.

What then of the Robbie cell? A subplot at best: window dressing elevated to the forefront. What is her Objective function? She gets sick. So do a lot of other people. What is her Subjective growth? She has none, she just changes her mind (ostensibly). She is not an Obstacle Character. She is not a Subjective Character. The Robbie cell is just a player, and as such would be a fine *device* if her cell didn't keep getting in the way of the *real* story between Sam and Ford.

General Ford has an Objective function as well. He is the *Contagonist* cell, which is made up of the elements *hinder* and *temptation*. Clearly he provides

> *We can see a Subjective Story growing between Sam and Ford. Each puts more and more pressure on the other until, in the end, one of them changes.*

both of those qualities in abundance. He scuttles Sam's efforts every step of the way and continually tempts him to give up the quest through the use of threats regarding the consequences of crossing the brass.

Before we fully understand the mechanism of the agents in Outbreak, we must examine one more important player in this virus: General McClintock, the Donald Sutherland cell. He is composed of *prevent* and *reconsider*, and functions to bring about both, making him the Antagonist. McClintock does all that he can to prevent Sam from finding and implementing a cure. He also forcefully pressures Ford, Sam, the bomber pilots and everyone else to reconsider their actions and decisions.

Did we miss anything important in our analysis? Oh yes! What about the deadly virus? What kind of player is it? Certainly a nonhuman can be a player, like the shark in Jaws, which was the Antagonist. (The Mayor in Jaws was the Contagonist.)

Well, the virus can't be Main or Obstacle. Those are spoken for. And it can't be Protagonist, Antagonist or Contagonist; those are also taken. We run all the tests we have available, and it comes up zilch. The virus isn't a character at all: just another player cell like Robbie. More window dressing. This window is so

Continued ⇒

dressed there's nothing left to hang on the manne-quins!

The capital "V" Virus, just a McGuffin? The real *star* of the show not even a character? We haven't seen this kind of slight since we ran the DNA of the dino-saurs in *Jurassic Park*! It harkens all the way to *Backdraft* where they did everything they could to turn the fire into a character except give it some.

Nothing remaining in our vial, we conclude this brief analysis of <u>Outbreak</u> and turn our attention to the <u>Hot Zone</u> sample in order to compare the two.

Peering though our scanning dramatic micro-scope we see differences in <u>The Hot Zone</u>'s structure right off the bat. For one thing we have great difficulty in locating a Main Character cell. We realize this immediately because there are several stories woven together, unlike <u>Outbreak</u>'s single thread. Yet, there is one *central* character cell in <u>The Hot Zone</u> that *is* common to all the stories. It is the Virus itself, and in fact, it is the Protagonist.

Virus as Protagonist? What an upgrade: from a walk-on in the movie to a fea-tured role in the book. Through-out <u>The Hot Zone</u>, the Ebola vi-rus (a *real* virus this time) is por-trayed as an animal in a cage, testing its bars, planning its strat-egies, stalking its prey. It has definite function, but also a point of view. This is a sure benchmark indicator that something Subjective is going on as well.

Clearly, the Ebola virus is not presented as the Main Character agent, for we do not look through its *eyes*, as it were, nor see things from its perspective. That leaves the Obstacle Character, and guess what... that's exactly what it is.

How compelling to look into the *mind* of a virus; to see what it is *thinking*. It thinks about us, you know. And that is where we find the true Main Character agent of <u>The Hot Zone</u>: we have met the victims and they are us.

We (the audience) are the Main Character of this propaganda **virus**, constantly mutating as we are sub-jected to different stimuli. As an example, we stand for a while in the shoes of both a married viral biologist, Colonel Nancy Jaax, and her viral biologist husband, Major Gerald Jaax. (Uncanny similarity to the di-vorced military viral biologists in <u>Outbreak</u>.)

The story of the Jaax cells rises to the forefront, like foam to the top of an Erlenmeyer flask. Still, their story is completely unconnected to another stimulus: that of

Charles Monet, the poor maintenance mechanic for a sugar factory who contracts Ebola in the first chapter. Similarly separate is the story of Mayinga N., a victim of a 1976 outbreak of Ebola.

What is the common element that connects all these dissimilar stimuli? We are led to become each of these character cells in turn, standing in their shoes, experiencing what is it like to *fight* the virus, what it is like to *have* the virus, both knowingly and unknow-ingly.

Thematically, each of the stories has the same message: there is a deadly virus, lurking not so far away, which could bring any one of us, perhaps *all* of us down. We must be on our guard; we must prepare. We must find a way to kill it before it kills us. Quite a different message from: the military did it!

The plot of <u>The Hot Zone</u> sample is built from story to story, as the virus learns new and better ways to break into the population and go worldwide. That is why the stories are presented out of chronological order: what does time matter to a *virus*? There need be no *temporal* progression from close call to closest call. What we must see is that there is a *spatial* progression as the virus knocks on one door after another. Sooner or later we're going to leave a latch unfastened.

We must *prevent* the virus from succeeding. We must pres-sure it to *reconsider* frolicking in our camp. That makes us the Antagonist as well as the Main Character, or so we think...

There is a very strange chapter at the end of the book. The previous text has been a narrative of the various player cells. Suddenly the perspective shifts as the author describes *his* visit in a pressure suit to the cave that spawns Ebola. At first this seems quite out of place. We are no longer looking at things *from* the author's point of view; now we are looking *at* the author. He has pulled a fast one on us. We thought we were the Main Character, suckered in we were only to discover *he* is Main and *we* are Obstacle, not the virus itself after all. Through a devilishly simple shift in context, the argument we felt we were making to others is now being made to us.

Who changes? We *have* to: the author won't, and the virus certainly isn't going to. If we don't change our nonchalant preconception that "it is so far away and it can't happen to us," it will be right here *happen-ing* to us!

> *How compelling to look into the mind of a virus; to see what it is thinking.*
>
> *It thinks about us, you know.*

D–Mail:

D-Mail: Obstacle Characterization

Mark:

Can OC [the Obstacle Character] be one thing for a time and hand off to another player in this theory? Or does MC [Main Character] get defined by OC from the start - in other words, does OC have to be there from start to finish in same player?

Thanks.
Thomas F.

• • •

Thomas,

The Obstacle Character function can be handed off successfully from one Objective Character to another, but it is tricky. There is a section in the theory book on "hand offs" and it covers this topic pretty well. The idea is that the

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The net effect is that we have been manipulated. This means we have been snookered into a point of view _and_ _are_ _quite_ _aware_ that it happened. If we had been propagandized, we would have altered our point of view without ever consciously realizing the fact.

That is the crucial difference between The Hot Zone and Outbreak **viruses**. Where the book sensitizes, the movie numbs. Where the book *manipulates* and raises our defenses, the movie *propagandizes* and attacks our immune system. The Hot Zone should be doled out to school children. Outbreak should be zoned out and confined to Biohazard Level Four.

END PROGRAM ❖

Obstacle Character function has to be felt throughout the entire story, it is a presence whose impact is felt by the Main Character, forcing the Main Character to face their personal problems. This function can be held in one player and then picked up by another, but the same appreciations have to be at work in both players when they are being the Obstacle Character; i.e. the same Concern, Range, Problem, Solution, Critical Flaw, Stipulation, etc.. If two characters in your story carry this function, then they should never meet in the same scene because it will feel like you have two of the same character in there. In a hand off, it is probably best to have the first Obstacle Character drop back and take up some archetypal Objective Story role, or maybe drop out of the story altogether.

The best hand off I've noticed yet is done in Clint Eastwood's "In the Line of Fire." The Obstacle Character function is first held in Renee Russo's character, the woman agent who eventually becomes Clint's partner. But when Clint's first partner is murdered by John Malkevich's character, then the John Malkevich character takes over the Obstacle Character position and Renee Russo becomes pretty much an archetypal sidekick. The thrilling storytelling at the time of this switch helps hide what's really happening. The authors also seemed to really have a firm grasp of how they wanted this to work, so they never violated the hand off and successfully had two characters represent the Obstacle Character function.

Your question makes me think of another example of how an Obstacle Character can be woven into a story in an unconventional way. The play "The Glass Menagerie" by Tennessee Williams has an Obstacle Character who doesn't actually appear on stage to say any lines until the last 1/3 of the play. The Main Character in this play is Laura, the meek daughter who is kind of hidden in the play by her lack of dialogue and activity. But her devotion to an unrequited love from her old high school is brought up regularly in the play, and this person is coincidentally invited over for dinner toward the end of the play. This allows Jim O'Conner to continue his role as the Obstacle Character in person. This example illustrates how the Obstacle Character has to be present throughout the whole play in some manner or other (like in Laura's little shrine to Jim), but doesn't have to actually be there in person for every single act.

Hope this helps.

Well, take care.
Mark Haslett ❖

You've finalized your storyform. You've polished your storytelling. You've created all your characters and assigned them to the characteristics. Now, what? What do you *do* with the pretty Build Characters Grid? What does it do for *you*? Wouldn't you like to know! Well, we're going to tell you...

First of all, it's important to note that in Dramatica you are asked to assign characters to characteristics, rather than the other way around. Traditionally, authors build characters as if they were constructing real people with real personalities. They throw in a wry sense of humor, some angst, a bit of drive, a dash of backstory, and *voila*: a living, breathing, three-dimensional character.

Any author with a modicum of inspiration can tool together any number of believable, realistic characters with which to populate a story. Unfortunately, they all look alike to us (*and* to most audiences, who've seen them all), which simply means: they're dull.

So an author with the modicum of inspiration furls a brow and does the "ninety percent perspiration" routine. Eventually, forged out of seemingly endless frustration and soul-searching, the character set has been revised so that each and every character is identifiably different from any of the others, perhaps even unique.

And then what do you have? A mess! Each of these wonderfully original characters was created as a little engine of dramatic potential with utter disregard for their function in the story at large. Several brilliantly designed pegs that just go down the hole.

If you have a message and your story is the vehicle by which you intend to deliver that message, building characters as if they existed outside of the story is a sure way to scuttle your own efforts. In contrast, building a dramatic storyform *first* and then constructing characters that grow out of your story's argument will assure that all aspects will work together to create a unified impact on your audience.

This quest for consistency is why the Dramatica Story Engine does not allow access to the Build Characters window until *after* your storyform has been created. Anything less would sever the dramatic ties that bind Character, Plot, Theme, and Genre together. Though this is clearly designed as a feature, you can't *imagine* how it infuriates writers! "How can I work within these constraints? I *always* begin with my characters" or, "I can't see any relationship between the storyform and the characters in the software. What are you trying to pull?!" and, "Okay, I've waited until I had a storyform. I've diligently built all my characters. *Now* what?!?!" All of which brings us right back to where we started: How do you use the Build Characters window?
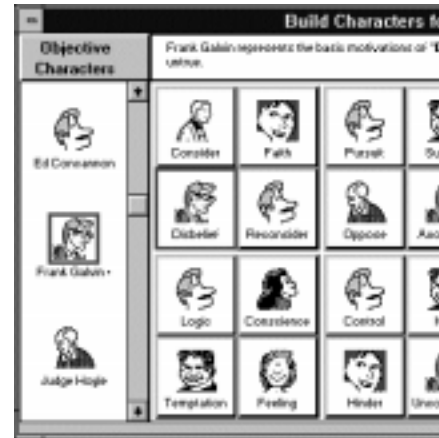

A screen shot of the Build Characters fro...

Use #1: *Building Characters*

In Build Characters, you are asked to start with the drama and then *assign characters* to each dramatic element. We *could have* constructed this feature so that the author would drag the characteristics to the character icons and plop them in, rather like dropping merchandise into grocery bags. This, however, would give the wrong feel for what is going on dramatically.

Instead, you create a character icon which contains no characteristics at all and then *assign* that character to *represent* one or more elements. Each elemental characteristic is a dramatic function that is an indispensable part of your story's argument. Leave it out and you create holes. By assigning characters to the elements, it becomes easier to keep in mind the purpose of characters in the drama: to advance the message.

Use #2: *Emphasizing Characteristics*

If your story is a *complete argument*, you will want characters to represent each element in all four *dimensions* of the Build Character Grid: *Motivations, Methodologies, Means of Evaluation, and Purposes.* In most stories,

however, not all of the dimensions are explored. For example, a given story might focus only on character motivations. Another story could concentrate on methodologies, as in most (but not all) stories written about Sherlock Holmes.

What determines which dimension of character will come forefront? The problem element. All of the sixty four characteristics in the Build Characters window also appear as the story's potential problems. One of those problems will be selected by you in the Query System or the Story Engine as the central inequity of your story: the crucial element whose unbalance is at the heart of the story's difficulties.

Once selected, you can locate that problem element in one of the four dimensions of the Build Characters Grid. That will be the dimension that should be emphasized in your story. In fact, you could completely ignore the other three dimensions, assigning no characters at all to their elements, and still make a strong argument about the story's problem and solution.

NOTE: *Dramatica Lite software only provides the character motivation grid. Most stories in our culture focus on motivations. As authors move into less traditional stories, the full complement of character dimensions proves increasingly useful.*

Use #3:
Building Main and Obstacle Characters

You might note that whatever the problem element is, its solution is directly diagonal to the problem. In a story in which the Main Character *changes*, the Main Character will represent the problem or solution element and the Obstacle Character will represent the other. In a story in which the Main Character remains steadfast, the Main Character will represent the focus or direction element, the Obstacle character the other.

The relationship of the Main and Obstacle to the Problem/Solution/Focus/Direction elements hinges the dramatics of the Objective and Subjective stories together. Use the chart below to determine exactly which elements Main and Obstacle will represent in your story.

For Change Main Characters		
	Success	Failure
Main Character	*Problem*	*Solution*
Obstacle Character	*Solution*	*Problem*

For Steadfast Main Characters		
	Stop	Start
Main Character	*Focus*	*Direction*
Obstacle Character	*Direction*	*Focus*

NOTE: *The Main and Obstacle Characters may also represent additional objective characteristics, such as when the Main Character is also the Protagonist. They must, however, at least represent the elements determined by the chart above to link the Objective and Subjective angles on the story's message.*

Also, because the Dramatica Lite software focuses on character motivations, it may not be possible to assign the crucial elements to the Main and Obstacle characters in the Build Characters Grid. Using the Dramatica Structural map provided with the software provides a handy alternative.

Use #4:
Character Relationships

Perhaps the *most* useful aspect of the Build Characters window is its ability to predict character relationships. These are determined by referring to the character icons' relative position in any given *quad* (group of four elements) in the grid. By simply noting whether character icons are diagonal, horizontal, or vertical, one can glean a full understanding of how and under what

conditions any two or more characters will relate in any given scene.

Diagonal relationships create *dynamic pairs* which foster the greatest conflict. Horizontal characters relate as *companion pairs*, where each impacts the other in indirect ways. Characters related vertically form *dependent pairs* where each relies on the other.

Because any given character may represent elements in several different quads, they might relate with any number of other characters or even in different ways with the same character. A practiced eye can easily discern these patterns across the Build Characters grid and develop a feeling for the kinds of relationships in which these characters will engage. Some authors even work organically and assign characters to the grid by position, in order to create just the kinds of relationships desired letting the characteristics fall where they may.

Relationship based character construction is only possible because a storyform has already been created. Character elements are arranged differently in the grid depending upon the storyform. As a result, relationships cannot be determined until the underlying dramatics have been chosen.

NOTE: *One advantage of the Dramatica Pro software is a feature that calculates these relationships automatically and presents them in a text and graphic format. A complete discussion of using the grid to determine relationships can be found in* Storyforming, *Vol. 1 No. 2. Back issues are available.*

Tying it all together:

By the time you leave the Build Characters window, you will have a list of your characters, the characteristics they will exhibit, an understanding of which dimension should be emphasized, and a feeling for they way your characters will relate.

As you write your scenes, you can call upon this information (either by referring back to the Build Characters window or through reports) to help you determine which characters should be in a given scene, what should be doing, and how they will be reacting to the others.

If a scene calls for someone to *pursue*, you call on the character representing *pursue*. To determine what *else* that character may be doing or how it may be acting or thinking, you refer to the report that lists its other characteristics. To create a given relationship with another character in the scene, you can conjure up just the right topics to bring them into conflict or force them to depend upon one another.

Nobody said writing was easy. Creating characters with the proper emphasis and relationships to tie the logistics and passion of a story together is perhaps the hardest task of all. Using the tools provided by the Build Characters window, however, can help you cover all sides of your story's argument with both precision and feeling. ❖

Character Relationships

Characters positioned diagonally from each other are called dynamic pairs and will tend to have the greatest conflict.

Characters positioned next to one another are call companion pairs and will tend to have the most indirect impact on each other.

Characters positioned above and below each other are called dependent pairs and will tend to form positive or negative dependencies.

Adaptation (page 1)

needs to know the answers to these questions.

Before we can investigate answers, it would be prudent to define some terms. First, what do we mean by "adaptation?" Simply, adaptation is the process of translating a story from one medium to another. What is a "medium?" A medium is a physical facility for storing information *and* the processes involved in retrieving it. Finally, what is "story?" For our purposes we shall define story as any information an author wishes to communicate to an audience (including considerations, experiences, and feelings).

So, putting it all together, *adaptation* is the process of translating information from one physical facility for storage and retrieval to another in such a way that it can be communicated to an audience. Sounds pretty cold, doesn't it. That's because this is simply the logistic description of adaptation.

A more organic description might be: Adaptation is the process of reproducing an audience experience in another medium. That has a better feel to it, but is much less precise. Also, we can clearly see a difference in the purpose of each approach, as indicated above when we spoke of the new story's identity versus its integrity. One seeks to maintain the parts, the other to be true to the whole. And that is the paradox at the heart of the adapter's dilemma: should authors strive to accurately recreate the structure or to faithfully reproduce the dynamics? More to the point, why can't we do both?

The answer lies with the media themselves. Every medium has its own strengths and weaknesses. Often what can be easily accomplished in one medium is either difficult or even impossible to achieve in another. Books are not very good at directly communicating sounds or visual atmospheres. The motion picture, on the other hand, is a poor medium for directly communicating a character's inner thoughts and feelings.

In each case, indirect means must be employed to accomplish what might be directly communicated in the other medium. To successfully adapt a work, an author must determine what to add or remove in order to achieve the same effect as the original medium.

It would seem that adaptations will always fail to capture some aspect of the original, either in substance or essence. That is true, but it does not have to be a fatal problem. An audience tends to emphasize certain aspects of a story as being essential. As long as an adaptation retains and/or recreates those essential elements, the audience will find the effort successful.

Beyond the essential, other elements may be more or less fully developed than in the original, providing something of the same flavor while allowing the latitude to tailor the piece for the new medium. The question then becomes how to determine which items are essential and how deeply they need to be developed, on a case by case basis.

The first step is to do a underlined complete analysis of the original work. Just reading the book a hundred times or watching the movie until the images are imbedded

> *You don't want to know a work just from the inside out, but you want to know it from the outside in as well – the way the audience sees it.*

on your retina is not good enough. You don't want to know a work just from the inside out, but you want to know it from the outside in as well - the way the audience sees it. To develop both an understanding and an empathy for the story, it helps to examine it in terms of the Four Stages of Communication.

The Four Stages of Communication describe the manner in which the author's original intent makes its way from her mind into the minds of her audience. Stage one is Story *forming*, in which the author first defines the message for herself. Stage two is Story *encoding*, where the author comes up with images and events to symbolize the message. Stage three is Story *weaving*, which is the process of arranging these images into scenes and acts. Stage four is Story *Reception*, which describes the relationship of the audience to the work. By analyzing how each of these stages is at work in a story, an author can make sure that the adaptation will work at *all* levels of appreciation.

Storyforming

A key concept of traditional narrative theory is that the narrative itself is transportable among media. The narrative is not the complete story, but simply the essential dramatics of the deep structure. In Dramatica, we call this the Storyform. Unlike narrative theory, Dramatica is very precise about what this underlying dramatic argument contains.

Each of the elements that must appear in a complete storyform is called an *appreciation*, because it is necessary for the audience to *appreciate* the story from that perspective to prevent a hole in the dramatic argument. Some appreciations are structural in nature, such as the story's *goal*, or the Main Character's *unique ability*. Others are more dynamic, such as the Main Character's *mental sex*, or the story's *limit* through the imposition of a *timelock* or an *optionlock.*

When analyzing a work to be adapted, it is sometimes difficult to separate the storyform from the storytelling. A good rule of thumb is to think of the storyform as the author's logistic argument and the storytelling as the *emotional* argument.

A good example of this can be seen by comparing Romeo and Juliet to West Side Story, Cyrano de Bergerac to Roxanne, or Heart of Darkness to Apocalypse Now. In each pair, the storyform is very nearly the same, while the storytelling is quite different.

An example of a poor adaptation that failed at the storyforming level was the translation of <u>A Christmas Carol</u> into the motion picture, <u>Scrooged</u>, starring Bill Murray.

In the original Dickens story, Scrooge is a character who must *start* doing something, rather than *stop* doing something. Scrooge is not best described as proactively hurting people but more as allowing suffering to continue due to his lack of action. He has a hole in his heart. The ghost of Christmas Present presents him with two children, *Want* and *Need*. They serve to illustrate the problems Scrooge perpetuates though his lack of generosity.

In the modern adaptation, Bill Murray's character is portrayed as someone who must *stop* doing something. He is shown as proactively harmful to a number of people. But when the argument is made for him to change, he is still presented with those who want and are needy. That argument is simply not appropriate to a character who needs to stop. As a result, the attempt to make a more proactive villain, updated for our time, failed because the supporting argument contained in the remainder of the storyform was not adjusted accordingly.

Use your Dramatica software to arrive at the single storyform that best describes the work you are adapting, and then make sure that if you decide to change anything, you run another storyform to learn what else must be changed as well. You may discover that only minor changes need to be accommodated, or you may find out that the storyform needs to be altered so heavily that the item you intended to change would scuttle any sense of familiarity with the original.

Story Encoding

If the story form is the skeleton, the story encoding is the meat. Let's take a single storyforming appreciation and see how encoding can flavor its meaning. Suppose the goal of the original story is to obtain the stolen diamonds. Without changing the storyform, we might adapt that to obtaining the stolen gold. We could also change it to obtaining a diploma, obtaining someone's love, or obtaining the office of President of the United States. Each and every one of these examples has a goal of obtaining, but each also has a different flavor depending solely upon the encoding.

Often, encoding is more important to an audience than anything else. Encoding determines the setting, the subject matter, the size and scope of the issues. Substituting stolen gold for stolen diamonds would probably be interchangeable to most audience members. Substituting obtaining a diploma would not.

Encoding is the first stage that is open to authors' interpretation. As such, it is important to fully illustrate the original story's storyform completely, so that all the specific symbols used by the author can be documented. Then, the process is to sort through the list, see which are essential, which are peripheral but must be given lip-service, and which can or even should be cut, due to the specifics of the new medium.

It is important to note that when delving into this much detail, it is easy to miss the forest for the trees. For example, if we elected to change "stolen diamonds" to "stolen gold" but still had our Main Character working for De Beers, we might have created a problem.

This is not to say that every encoded appreciation must be consistent with all the others in flavor. In fact, many stories are appealing simply because they juxtapose contrasting symbols. The key is to make sure you maintain the same relationship *between* the flavors.

Much like adapting a recipe for a culinary feast, you might substitute salt for sugar, but then you must also substitute vinegar for sour cream.

Much like adapting a recipe for a culinary feast, you might substitute salt for sugar, but then you must also substitute vinegar for sour cream. The overall flavor would be completely different, but the relationship between the flavors is maintained. That level of pattern-recognition is well within the grasp of even the most unsophisticated audiences. How many times has <u>The Simpsons</u> replicated famous scenes from famous movies in a completely different context? They worked because the *internal* relationships remained consistent.

Story Weaving

Storyweaving is the process of unfolding the symbols of your story for the audience. It is where suspense, tension, mystery, and surprise are created. When adapting genres such as horror, thriller, and murder mystery, it should be noted that the experiential mood is almost storyform and storyencoding dependent. It is the weaving that takes center stage, and is therefore the most crucial item to maintain in the adaptation.

With murder mysteries particularly, the manner in which the cat is let out of the bag defines the audience experience. A great deal of the appeal of a Sherlock Holmes mystery, for example, is due to the steps through which the chase becomes afoot. Holmes has been successfully translated to virtually every time and place in human history changing both storyform and storyencoding until nothing remains of the original because the *feel* remains the same due to the way the case unravels. In many respects, the Holmes stories are identified by their exposition template, and that is why the audience comes to the work.

This is the same stage of communication that is emphasized in The Twilight Zone (the first series, the movie adaptation, and the adapted second series), The Outer Limits (first series and adapted series), and virtually every Stephen King book and movie. Ever wonder exactly *why* some of King's best works don't translate well to the screen? The adaptations that don't work change the storyweaving, which is the identifying trademark of the King experience.

Make sure you examine the manner in which the audience is let in on the secrets of the story to be adapted. Is the story an Extrovert that lets it all hang out from scene one? Is it a Flirt that flaunts it but takes its time in delivering? Is your story an Introvert than must have its secrets coaxed out one at time, or is it a Liar that fools us with red-herrings and misdirections?

> *Unless you strive to maintain the original's personality, much of the charm may be lost in the translation.*

Unless you strive to maintain the original's personality, much of the charm may be lost in the translation. A current example of this kind of mistake occurred in bringing The Beverly Hillbillies to the big screen. In the original series, the storyweaving personality was much like a British comedy of manners in which the cultured and proper are forced by circumstances to accommodate unsophisticated bumpkins. Enter Politically Correct storyweaving. Suddenly, the focus of comedy shifts from manners to physical comedy.

The slapstick gags are funny enough, but that is not what the audience expected. The Beverly Hillbillies they grew up with was no where to be found in this movie. The personality associated with the title was not maintained. Interestingly, if there had been no original series, the motion picture would likely have been much funnier to an unbiased audience. When creating an original work, storyforming considerations can be limited to exposition of the storyform. When adapting a work, storyforming must also take into account the expectations of the audience, described in the fourth stage of communication, Story Reception.

Story Reception

We started in Storyforming with the message, encoded it into symbols, transmitted those symbols through storyweaving, and now that scrambled signal arrives at the receiver: your audience. Problem is, they all might be tuned to a different channel!

Some members of your audience will be familiar with the original work itself. Some may have experienced it many times. Others will have heard about it from a friend, but never actually saw the original. Many have only seen the trailer, or the book review, or the trading cards, or the lunch box. A few have never heard of it at all and just stumbled upon your adaptation. You may want to play on in-jokes and setups that require prior knowledge. How about that scene in the original Superman when he runs up to the phone booth to change and there's somebody using the phone? It would not be nearly as funny to anyone not recognizing it as a twist on the original pattern.

In addition, there is really no such thing as an audience, except when defined as a collection of individuals who experience a work. They may have nothing else in common, so you can't expect them to respond as a single unit. What buzz words can you safely use? Which obscure buzz words do you want to use anyway because you expect they will catch on and become all the rage? How much biased, special-interested, politically correct, atheistic, agnostic, faithful, black, brown, white, red, yellow, young, old, middle-aged, female, male, gay, straight, bi, Republican, Democratic, Independent, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, brilliant, stupid, insane, and emotionally challenged baggage are they going to carry to your adaptation?

Part of the adapter's job is to identify the audience. An equally important job is to identify *with* the audience. This puts a burden on the author of an adaptation that the author of an original work usually does not share.

When creating an original story, one often has the luxury of writing whatever one wants, and then hoping the finished piece finds its audience. In contrast, the adept adapter must consider the full spectrum of

the *new* audience. Usually, if a work is being considered for adaptation, it is because there has been some following of the original. The adaptation is intended to exceed that audience and attract a wider crowd.

How do you adapt a work for the masses? Simple. Make sure the story works not only as an adaptation, but on its own merits as well. Never violate dramatic integrity solely for the sake of adaptive integrity. Better to disappoint a few diehard fans than to disappoint the potential legions of new fans.

Conversely, there are those projects where the size of the new audience is unimportant. The purpose of this kind of adaptation is to supply those few diehard fans with a new medium of enjoyment for their favorite story. In this case you must be faithful to every detail, even if it turns out a work that can't stand on its own merit.

Either approach is justification enough to shape the nature of the adaptation. Seldom can both be done at the same time. More than anything, Story Reception is where the author decides for whom they wish to write. Once you have identified that group, you must get into their heads, to get into their hearts.

In Summary

Adaptation is no simple task. It requires familiarity with both the logistics and passion of the original, from the inside out and the outside in. To achieve this familiarity, one must resonate with the original on many levels, best examined through the Four Stages of Communication:

- **Storyforming:** Storyform the original and make sure to storyform any changes you make in the adaptation.

- **Story Encoding:** Delineate the original encoding and determine what must be lifted verbatim, might be altered, or could be eliminated.

- **Story Weaving:** Reproduce the storyweaving personality to faithfully reproduce the dramatic flow.

- **Story Reception:** Determine the prior knowledge and expectations of your audience.

In conclusion and above all, to your new audience be true, for then how canst thee be false to the original? ▿

AOL Log Gem

"Each of us can make pictures in clouds, see faces in wall paper, and images in ink blots. We create meaning whether any was intended or not. So, the audience is to some degree the author of their own reception. A finished creative work will contain all four stages [of communication] blended together. That's what makes it hard for an author to see flaws in their work."

(The above was excerpted from the text of a Dramatica America On Line cyberclass log. These logs can be found on AOL in the Writers Club, non-fiction library, under "Dramatica Class…")

Twit's End
by Mark Haslett

I STILL DON'T LIKE IT!

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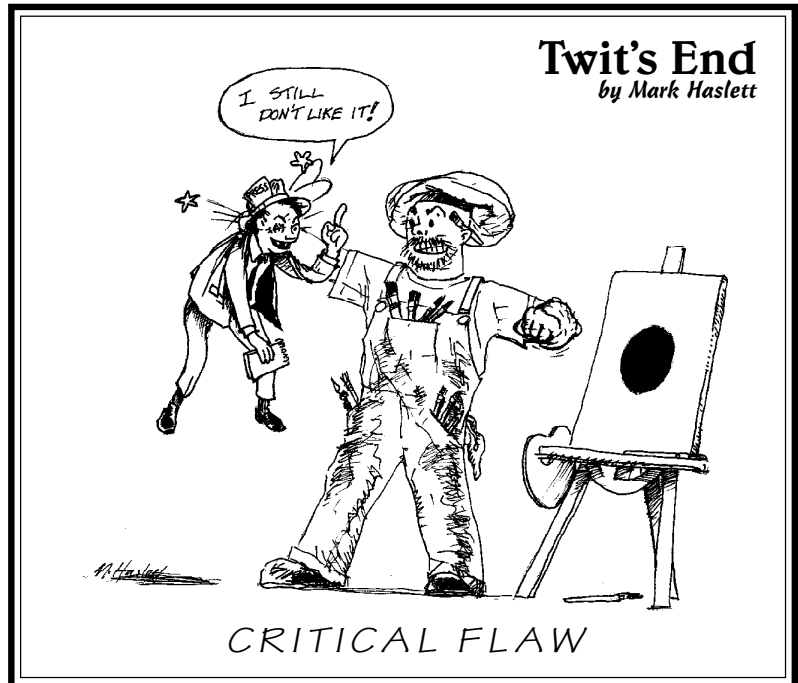
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Our premiere issue with *Constructive Criticism* of Steven Spielberg's Jurassic Park! This in-depth look at the story for this film includes not only a clear view of what does and does not work, but also how Dramatica suggests it should have been done. **Also in this issue:** an article illuminating the real differences between male and female Mental Sex and Dramatica Tips for identifying the Throughlines of your story; in the center, a special Dramatica Structural Model Centerfold pinup.

Vol. I, No. 2

"True Liabilities" —our *Constructive Criticism* look at True Lies, detailing Dramatica's suggestion for pulling all of this film's divergent pieces together in to create an integrated story. **Also in this issue:** *Constructive Criticism* of Clear and Present Danger; an article about the elements of character and character relationships; tips for picking the proper Classes for your story's Domains; and an analysis of Storyweaving techniques used in Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie.

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Our "Holiday 'Fair'"—a Constructive Criticism of the 1994 Christmas season's CORNucopia of movies. Speed, Stargate, Interview With The Vampire, Star Trek: Generations, and The Pagemaster are all reviewed in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of their stories. Then Dramatica suggests what could have been done to make these stories shine. Also in this issue: Storytelling tips for breathing life into YOUR Storyform.

Vol. II, No. 1

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