

Writing Stories to Explore The Ethics of Technology

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Part Two: A Top Down Approach to Story Design

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Chapter 4 – A Top Down, Goal Oriented, Technical Approach

The Writing Process

There are a variety of approaches to writing each of which has its strengths and weaknesses and each of which is more or less applicable to a given situation. I am going to focus on two very different approaches in this introduction as a means of explaining the approach that I lay out in this book. One approach, the one I will use in this book, I call the structured or technical approach. It views a story as a narrative argument and a solution to a persuasion problem. The second approach, with which I will contrast it, I call the organic or expressive approach. This approach views a story as a vehicle for self expression. Let's consider each one in turn.

One of the common myths or misconceptions about writing sees a writer sitting down at the typewriter (or today a word processor) typing out "It was a dark and stormy night" and then proceeding, uninterrupted to write the great American novel. I don't intend to enforce a cultural bias here; "the great American novel" is a clichéd and dubious expression for this kind of activity. I can't say for certain that this has *never* happened as I have not done an extensive survey of the lives of writers. But, I can say that it is extremely unlikely. Perhaps I should say EXTREMELY unlikely. While writing can be a tremendously pleasurable process, it can also be an agony. The writer above might well find that producing the line following "It was a dark and stormy night" is a task on the order of creating life from coal and limestone. Why is this? And why is it that someone can be pouring out the words and then hit a dry spell. There is no mystery here and understanding how this works makes the process of writing much less daunting.

The Organic or Expressive Approach

The organic or expressive approach to writing attempts to find a voice to express your inner feelings or reactions to the world around you in a verbal medium. It can be recognized by phrases such as "finding the writer within", or "finding your voice". The point is that you have internal subjective reactions to the world around you and you wish to share those reactions with others. With some luck, your reactions might resonate with others and give voice to their internal subjective experiences.

In order to develop your voice in the organic approach you might start with simple exercises such as writing about the beauty of a lovely spring morning or the frustration of sitting in traffic on the way home after a long day. You can judge the quality of your writing in this approach if others can read your writing and experience what you experienced. So, writers who are developing this approach might work in writers groups so that they can share their writing with others to get feedback.

The expressive approach is good for people who enjoy the experience of writing and wish to have their internal subjective experiences validated by others. It is good for memoirs, journals, autobiographies and self expression. It is also good for writers who prefer expression to discipline. Yet, it is also somewhat daunting because there is little structure. You write what you feel. You express your

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reactions. Who is to say if the writing is good or not; as nobody else has access to your internal subjective experiences but you. This is a bit like singing in the shower. If you are good; then so much the better. But, if not, who really cares? Success in this approach is feeling satisfied with what you have written.

The Structured or Technical Approach

While the expressive approach is an attempt to give voice to subjective experiences, the technical approach is an attempt to construct a persuasive narrative argument. This could also be called a goal oriented approach in that a goal is established for the piece of writing and the techniques of writing are employed to help achieve that goal. I don't mean to imply that these two approaches are mutually exclusive. I suspect most writers use some combination of the two. However, separating them for the purposes of this discussion and the approach taken in this book is useful. I like to emphasize the technical approach for two reasons. First, it is the most useful approach for what I am trying to achieve in this book. And, second, I think writing, in general, suffers from a lack of emphasis on technique. Since this is, I believe, a fairly important issue, I am going to digress and explain why I believe that to be the case.

If you wanted to learn to play the piano, you would not just bang out some notes and then ask the people around you if they liked it. If you wanted to learn how to paint, you would not just start dabbing paint on a canvas and ask others what they thought. And if you wanted to learn how to cook, you would not just throw some things in a skillet and then ask people to taste them. In each of these cases, you would learn the techniques of piano, painting or cooking first. Then you would practice those techniques. Once you had become proficient you might invite others to experience and critique your creations. Only in writing do we write something and then ask others to critique it. Some might argue that spelling and grammar are the techniques of writing. But you can write something that has perfect spelling, no grammar errors and is worthless. There are techniques to writing, especially creative writing, that must be mastered before one can attempt to write anything worthwhile.

You might argue that people write for their own enjoyment. They like expressing themselves. I would agree and would further support the notion that this is a legitimate role for writing. However, I would also point out, that it is not a legitimate role if you are writing something for others to read. You may bang on the piano for pleasure, but that does not mean your music is worthy of an audience. You may dab paint on a canvas for relaxation. But that does not mean that your work is destined for an art gallery. And you may enjoy your own cooking creations, but you probably shouldn't serve it to guests.

The point is that each of these forms of creative expression, as well as any others, can be seen in two very different roles. One role is to provide you with a means of personal pleasure. The other role is to allow you to express yourself for the betterment of others. If you are going to do the latter, you must learn the basic techniques first. And writing is no different. So, we will take a top down technical approach to writing in this, and subsequent, chapters not just because it is the easiest way to develop

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the skills we are targeting in this book; but because it is also the correct way to learn how to write. Yes, I know that is a bold statement. But it is best to be clear about one's positions.

A Goal Oriented Design Approach

The structured or technical approach is less about expressing your feelings and more about achieving a desired result. Most good writers do structure their work to some degree. They may outline or plot. They may sketch out character traits on the side. But, we are going to take that structuring to an extreme where very little is left to chance or talent. As John Gardner said in *The Art of Fiction*, "Fiction is made up of structural units; it is not one great rush".

And we are going to take that notion of structural units very seriously. We will begin with a problem statement which will explain what we are trying to achieve with the story. Next we will define story objectives which identify the story elements needed to solve the problem. The story objectives are, essentially, a hierarchical organization of the elements of the story needed to address the problem. Or they can be thought of as the elements of a narrative argument. Once we have the story objectives, we have the story 'design'. The design will describe the elements of the story, including characters, setting, point of view, theme, and plot outline needed to address the problem we wish to address. Next, we take that story design and write a story from it.

The problem statement and the story design are the elements that make this structured approach somewhat unique and appropriate for people who have seen this design approach in other areas such as software design. This approach is actually applicable to any design effort whether it is software design, organization design, or designing an event. That is to say that I am not just taking something from software and applying it to stories. I am applying generic techniques of design to a more disciplined approach to writing a story. Consequently, it bears a moment's digression to explain a little about design and the differences between analysis and design.

Analysis and Design

In the world of software we often use the phrase 'analysis and design' as though it were a single integrated activity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only are the activities of analysis and design very different, they require very different skills, solve very different problems, and produce very different end products. Analysis is the process of dissecting a thing in order to understand it better. Design is the process of constructing a solution to meet specified objectives. Analysis will tell you what 'is' but not what 'ought to be'. Design tells you what 'ought to be'. Analysis may reveal a problem. But design offers a solution. The object of analysis must exist in the world today and the object of design is a thing that will exist in the future. Finally, analysis requires attention to detail whereas design requires imagination.

Analytical activities have a lot in common with each other. Whether it is systems analysis, market analysis, financial analysis, even psychoanalysis, we have an existing thing we are trying to understand better. Design activities also have a lot in common with each other. Whether it is system design, new product design or portfolio design, we are putting together components to solve a problem.

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Universities often spend a lot of time developing analytical skills, which is a good thing. But it is often disproportionate to the extent that these skills are actually used. At the same time, very little time is spent developing design skills and the imagination needed to design things even though we probably spend way more time constructing solutions to problems than we do on understanding existing phenomenon. Any time you ask “what happened” it is a task for analytical skills. Whenever you ask “what should we do?” it is a task for the imagination. That is enough of a digression for now. We will come back to the issue of developing one’s imagination later in this book.

What is the Problem?

We begin our story design with a problem that we are attempting to solve. But before we dive straight into defining problems that stories can solve, we need to develop a more rigorous understanding of what we mean by a ‘problem’. Let’s begin by saying that if life were perfect, there would be no need to do anything. Hopefully that is self-evident. But, in case it is not, consider the fact that if life were perfect anything that you might do to change something would only make it less nearly perfect. So, in those cases when life is not perfect we may want to do something to make it better. When there is an inconsistency, between how we perceive things to be and how we expect them to be, we have a problem to solve. (This definition of a problem is adapted from *Exploring Requirements: Quality Before Design* by Donald C. Gause and Gerald M. Weinberg who referred to a problem as a gap rather than an inconsistency. However whether we see a problem as a gap or an inconsistency, things are not as we would like them to be.)

Note that there are no problems in nature. It takes a human looking at a situation and deciding that things are not as they should be in order to have a problem. Further, the problem could either be found in our perception or in our expectations. For example, if I feel that I should be independently wealthy and am not then I have a problem. One way to solve the problem would be to become independently wealthy. Another would be to accept my current circumstances. In between are a whole range of solutions involving varying degrees of acceptance and capital acquisition. Finally, the notion of a problem is subjective. What might be perceived as a problem by one person might not be perceived as a problem by another.

Not every problem is solvable. I might feel that the world should be at peace and as long as there is conflict somewhere, I feel that there is a problem. Further, I cannot adjust my expectations to allow any degree of conflict. I have a problem and it is not solvable. Other problems may be solvable. I may feel that my social life is inadequate because I spend every evening sitting around my house watching reruns of *Friends*. So, I take steps to become more involved socially. Since this is with my power and capabilities, this problem is solvable.

Most problems require some degree of technical skill of some kind. If I want to impress you with a dinner that I cooked, I’d better know something about cooking. If I want to upgrade the memory on my computer for better performance, I’d better know something about hardware. If I want to write an email to a vendor to get a refund on a product I didn’t like, I’d better know something about persuasive writing. And this brings us to the definition of a solvable problem. A problem is solvable if the

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inconsistency can be rectified given the talent, resources and motivation of the problem solver. In general, there is little point in worrying about unsolvable problems. If you can't do anything about it, don't worry about it.

Solvable Problems in Ethics

Any design initiative should begin with a clearly defined problem. But we are not taking on the world of design. We are only concerned here with writing stories to explore the ethics of technology. And the solvable problems within this arena are, thankfully, limited. In fact, most problems that fall within the ethics of technology can be conveniently organized into three categories: people are unaware of something they should be aware of, they are aware of a problem but don't care about it, or they are aware of a problem and do care about it but don't know what to do. Let's take each of these possibilities in turn.

If people are unaware of a problem we need to make them aware. They may be unaware that there even is an issue. They may be unaware of the complexity of an issue or its subtleties. They may be unaware of both sides of an issue or even that there are two sides. They may be unaware of unexpected outcomes of a situation. If the problem is a lack of awareness, then the problem we are trying to solve with the story is to increase their awareness. Generally, just increasing awareness is a little too broad. And it is best if we attempt to increase awareness of specific aspects of a situation. If people are apathetic we need to make them care. This means that the story must introduce sympathetic characters who are injured in some way by the situation under scrutiny. Finally, If people are willing to do something we need to suggest some solutions. So, in this case, the story may reveal a potential solution to the problem.

Some Sample Problems

Let us consider some sample problems that may arise as a result of the mind reading technology mentioned earlier.

Problem 1: People are likely to jump to one side of the issue or the other without understanding the complexities. For example, some will say mind reading is great because it will help us catch criminals and terrorists. Others will see mind reading as an invasion of privacy and be opposed to it in any form. The problem here is that our understanding of the issue is simplistic and we need a more nuanced understanding.

Problem 2: When people think of mind reading, they think of it as portrayed on television and in movies where they actually hear a voice articulating a person's thoughts. In reality, mind reading would be very different from that as people do not always think verbally and even when they do it is rarely in complete and articulate sentences.

Problem 3: The implications of mind reading technology are unknown and people are afraid of the unknown. Hence, they are likely to be opposed to this technology without really understanding it.

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Taking the problems in reverse order, the third problem is probably not a solvable problem. People are afraid of the unknown and it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to write a story to alleviate fears of the unknown. It may be possible to reduce that fear to some extent by reducing uncertainty. But, that would require focusing on the facts of mind reading rather than the ethical implications.

The second problem suffers from some of the same difficulties that the third one does in that it requires facts rather than an exploration of implications to solve. It is a little better than the third problem in that it may be possible to reveal, through narrative, what the experiences of reading minds and having your mind read might be like.

The first problem is the best problem to address through a story. People are likely to have a knee jerk reaction with regard to the implications of mind reading and it is possible to reveal, through a story, that a more textured and nuanced understanding is required.

5 – Writing Story Objectives

Why Objectives?

Objectives are important in any kind of design work because they help you articulate what you are trying to achieve. In a story, in particular, objectives help you describe what you expect to achieve in the story in terms of the elements of the story. Because of the generic applicability of objectives we will first describe some generic characteristics of objectives and then we will focus specifically on story objectives. It is interesting to note that the use of objectives was popularized back in the 1950's by Peter Drucker in what came to be known as Management By Objectives. MBO was a sound idea that faltered in implementation. The problem was not that objectives are not a good way to manage. The problem was that people had difficulty defining appropriate objectives. Since appropriately defined objectives are critical to the technique described in this book, we will digress briefly and discuss the nature of well defined objectives. When setting out to write a story, potential authors may begin with objectives such as: my objective is to write the best story ever written, or my objective is to change the way the world sees this ethical issue; or my objective is to get an A on this assignment. These are horrible objectives and as we look more deeply into objectives, we will see why.

What are Objectives?

In the previous chapter we began our story design by articulating a solvable problem. That problem, unless it is fairly trivial, cannot be solved directly in a single step. We need to assemble a collection of components – characters, places, events, symbols, etc – in order to solve it. We can think of objectives as sub problems, or, more specifically, solvable sub problems. We take a large problem that cannot be solved directly and decompose it into sub problems that can be solved. If those sub problems are still too large to solve directly then we have to decompose them further. However, at some point, objectives need to be units of work, something achievable, within the techniques of the area where we are doing the design. Later in this chapter we will see how to define story objectives. But first we need to get a little more insight into the nature of objectives.

Levels of Objectives

Traditionally, there are three levels of objectives – strategic, tactical, and operational. While there is nothing new about this, the interpretation here may be a little different. Typically, the level of the objective corresponds to the time frame in which the objective will be achieved. So, strategic objectives are long term objectives, tactical objectives are middle term objectives, and operational objectives are short term objectives. The interpretation that I am using here for strategic objectives is that they not only represent a thing that will be achieved in the longer term, but that achievement also represents a change or repositioning from where we are today. A business might say that they plan to grow at 2% per year for the next twenty years or that they want to reduce their debt ratio by a certain amount over the next twenty years. But, even though these are long time frames they do not represent strategic objectives because they do not represent a repositioning of any kind. On the other hand if a business were to state that over the next twenty years, it planned to get out of consumer electronics and into business computer services, that would be a strategic objective as that is a change in kind from what it is

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doing today to what it will be doing in the future. Or if it set out to close all of its retail stores and do its entire business over the web that would be a strategic objective.

In the case of a story, a strategic objective would be to change prevailing views or understandings of an issue. There are a number of very well known novels that have done this. Examples include *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and various works by Charles Dickens, just to name a few. This is a bold undertaking and I am not sure how often this kind of thinking figures into an author's planning. Further, I am not sure how often it is successful if it is considered. But, I wanted to include it for the sake of completeness lest our treatment of objectives here be incomplete. We will be more humble in our aspirations in this book. Getting a story written to meet tactical objectives will be enough.

Tactical objectives are the linkage between a problem and the means by which a problem is solved in a given domain. This is where the process of defining objectives is most likely to break down. If you were defining the objectives for a new computer system it would require an understanding of business problems that can be solved using computers and an understanding of the technical options within the field of information technology that can be brought to bear on those problems. If you specify a database to solve a business information problem, it requires that you understand how businesses use information to make decisions as well as how database technologies are used to provide information. The point here is that tactical objectives require one to be knowledgeable in two separate areas – the problem area and the area where the techniques exist to solve problems. Since knowledge spanning two areas is less common than expertise in a single area, having the required knowledge to define tactical objectives is often in short supply.

Nonetheless, tactical objectives in a story are the story elements required to address the specified problem. Further, they are the traditional elements of a story – theme, characters, setting, plot sequence, and point of view. We will delve into these in far more detail later in the book. But for now think of it as saying something like the following:

In order to make the reader care about this issue, I need a character that is affected by this issue and that the reader will care about; In order to make my character sympathetic, I need a character with the following features... affected by the following events...

Operational objectives are short term objectives that are usually measurable in some way. Going back to the database example for a moment, operational objectives would include things like response time, how long it would take to generate a new report, percentage of up time and so on. Note that strategic and operational objectives do not say anything about how they are to be achieved. Tactical objectives are the linkage between problems and solutions. This is a little trickier with stories than it is with computer systems. But, here are some examples none the less.

After reading this story, the reader will develop a different perspective on the issue under consideration.

After reading this story, the reader will have more insight into the complexities of this issue.

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Note that these objectives are, in theory, measurable using pre reading and post reading questionnaires. One the key features of operational objective is that they should be measurable.

Types of Objectives

Another thing that makes the definition of objectives difficult is that not all objectives are of the same type and not all objectives bear the same relationship to other objectives. Some objects complement each other. Some objectives represent a decomposition of other objectives. Some objectives compete with each other. And some objectives constrain other objectives. This leads us to the identification of three types or kinds of objectives: component, competing, and constraining.

Component objectives form a hierarchy of objectives and sub objectives which is an ends/means decomposition of one aspect of the problem. In order to achieve objective A we must achieve sub objectives B, C, and D. If B, C or D is not an achievable unit of work, then we may have to decompose further until we arrive at achievable units of work.

Competing objectives cannot be achieved simultaneously and thus must be evaluated in a trade-off analysis which determines the relative priority of each. If A and B are competing objectives then we might decide something like 60% A and 40% B.

Constraining objectives place limitations on the possible solutions. The difference between a constraint and a constraining objective is that a constraining objective is something you are trying to achieve and it can be achieved in a variety of ways. However, too many constraining objectives may make the problem unsolvable.

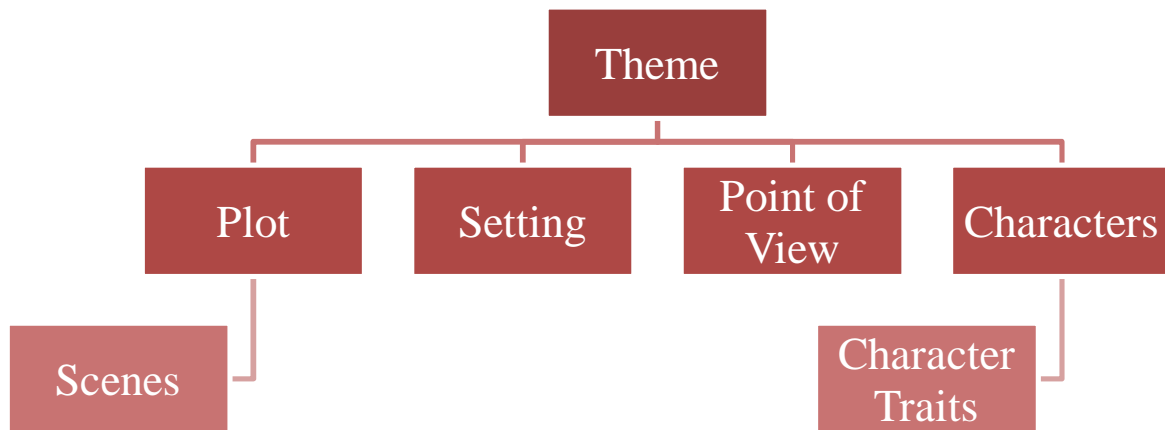
Since these types of objectives are rather specific it is best to look at them in specific instances which we will do in subsequent chapters as we look at the elements of a story.

Technical Objectives

The discussion of objectives thus far has been largely generic and would apply to any design activity; with the exception of some specific story related examples. When we reach technical objectives we reach the point where the kinds of objectives become specific to the design area. Since our focus is on story design, we will now turn to the elements of a story and see how they can be thought of as story objectives. In order to provide examples along the way, we will use the example discussed earlier where a technology is developed to read minds and we need to decide whether it should be controlled or freely available.

The first thing we must consider is the theme of the story. This is far easier for us than it is for the generic creative writer who can look for inspiration virtually anywhere. Certainly one of the hurdles that most writers face is the question – what should I write about? This daunting questions probably stops many a prospective writer right there in their tracks. But for us, it is not so daunting. We have a problem statement and we are going to write about that problem. Given that we already have a problem statement to constrain our possibilities, our next step is to select a theme for exploring that problem. Once again we do not have an unlimited variety of options. We basically have three choices for the

theme. We can take a side with regard to the ethical issue and that side can be for or against any one of the possible positions. We can find a balancing point between the issues and force the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. Or we can provide equal merit to any subset of the possible positions to show the reader that the issue is more complex than the proponents of various positions may have you believe.



Recall the problem statement from the previous chapter.

People are likely to jump to one side of the issue [mind reading] or the other without understanding the complexities. For example, some will say mind reading is great because it will help us catch criminals and terrorists. Others will see mind reading as an invasion of privacy and be opposed to it in any form. The problem here is that our understanding of the issue is simplistic and we need a more nuanced understanding.

Here we have chosen not to take a side on the issue of mind reading, only to show this issue is more complicated than the reader may have previously assumed. So, our theme will be that mind reading has benefits and costs, and that any position strictly for or against is probably naïve. We do not wish to leave the reader with an opinion for or against. We want to leave the reader with the impression that this is more complicated than they originally may have thought and that they need to think about the issue a little more deeply.

We can achieve this by relating a story of two characters, one who is harmed by mind reading and one who benefits from it. What kind of characters do we need for this? To begin with, both should be likeable as we are trying to gain sympathy for both sides. The one who is harmed should be a slightly quirky individual with an occasional odd thought that might put him at odds with his co-workers. This person, without the mind reading technology, might be the kind of person who occasionally blurts out something that would have been better off unsaid. Since more people know this kind of person they will be able to relate to him. The one who benefits should be a shy and introvert person who is afraid to speak her mind about things. In her case the people around her will understand her better by reading

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her thoughts as she does not have the resolve to speak her mind. Most of us also know someone who never seems to have an opinion on anything. So we should be able to relate to this person as well. Note that, once again, we are not at the level of achievable work. We would have to define further sub objectives that would explain how we would achieve the creation of such characters. How we would do this is discussed further in the chapter on creating compelling characters.

In general, you need to ask yourself what kind of characters do you need to carry the story. Which characters should the reader be sympathetic to and which characters should the reader find repulsive. What do we need to do to make a character sympathetic or repulsive? The characters in the story are important, not only because they carry the action of the story, but because the readers will care about what happens to the characters. If the readers care about the characters then they will care about this issue being explored.

For the setting we ask ourselves the question – where would such a thing occur? And, is the setting part of the problem or just a place where the conflict is occurring. We are going to choose to set this story in a caring, but slightly rigid, mildly intolerant setting where people who have aberrant thoughts are judged a little too harshly. This setting works for the other character as well since one who is afraid to express her opinion would be more believable in a mildly intolerant setting. We want the setting to be harsh but not unduly harsh as that would make it unrealistic and thus less effective. The setting also has to be caring to accommodate the other sympathetic character. Note how we have competing objectives here. The setting must be caring on one hand and mildly intolerant on the other. In order to give equal weight to each character we will need to give equal weight to these competing objectives.

Note, again, that this objective does not really specify much detail about the setting. It must be decomposed further before it becomes something we can write about. Hence, it will require component objectives. Any number of settings would satisfy the above objective. In fact, nearly any setting where conformity is prized over individuality would work. It could be a boarding school, a military base, a monastery, a competitive corporate environment, just to name a few. It would probably not work at a writer's workshop, a university, or a community that respected individuality and autonomy. The point is that just because we have our first level objective for setting does not mean we are done.

The plot provides a reasonable narrative causal sequence of events that lead up to the conflict that we are trying to explore. Consequently, our plot objectives describe the elements of that narrative argument. In the example under consideration we don't really care how the one character got quirky or how the other became introverted. We only care that they are. So, we will introduce the characters in the setting and once their characters are established we will go directly to the conflicts for each. In this particular example, it may be difficult to predict how the characters will behave in their respective situations. So, we will create the characters, let them evolve and let the plot evolve along with them.

Before leaving this section on technical objectives two points bear further emphasis. First, objectives must be achievable units of work. They must be something that we know how to do with the techniques of the area (in this case writing stories) in which we are defining the technical objectives. Second, it must

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be clear to anyone knowledgeable in this area that if all the objectives are met, the problem that we began with will be solved.

Some Problems in Defining Objectives

As mentioned earlier, the use of objectives is nothing new but successfully using objectives is a challenge. One of the reasons for this is that there are some predictable mistakes that people make when trying to define objectives. Simply because a statement is a goal that someone wants to achieve does not make it a good objective. Following are some examples of statements that may sound like objectives to one who does not fully understand the concept, but are not really objectives. Poorly defined objectives can even do more damage than not defining objectives at all. This is because poorly defined objectives can waste effort in pursuit of a goal that cannot be achieved.

A common mistake that people make when defining objectives is that they simply replace objectives with values. We can think of these as universal objectives. Universal objectives are objectives that are true regardless of circumstances. Consider the following statements: the objective of our company is to make a profit; my objective in writing this story is to get an A for the class; my objective in life is to live life to its fullest. These are not well formed objectives for two reasons. The first is that they do not represent units of work and cannot reasonably be decomposed into units of work. Second, it would be difficult to imagine a circumstance in which the opposite objective would be appropriate. An objective should not only contain a statement of what is to be done. But, it must also, by implication, suggest what is not important.

A second mistake is the unrealistic objective. Consider the statement – my objective is to change the way the world thinks about biotechnology. This is more specific than the universal objective in that it focuses on biotechnology. But it is unrealistic because one is unlikely to impact the entire world. Further, it is too vague as “changing the way people think” can mean a lot of different things. Some people may have thought biotechnology was a wonderful thing and then changed their minds to think it was a danger. Other people may have gone the other way. But both would have changed their thinking. Others, yet, may have thought biotechnology was interesting but changed their minds to think it was boring. These kinds of objectives may feel good but are of limited value in achieving goals.

Sometimes we forget about what we are trying to achieve and state a possible solution as an objective. This is a little more difficult to explain in stories so consider a different kind of example. Let's say that your social life has begun to sag a bit. You notice that you spend way too much time watching TV and eating junk food. Your clothes no longer fit as well as they once did. So you decide to go on the XYZ diet and state, as your objective, that you want to go on the XYZ diet for four months. We view the diet to be a solution to our problems here but we have not really articulated the problem. Is the problem that you don't have enough friends? Or enough interests? Are our bored or maybe boring? Are you antisocial or lazy? There can be any number of problems here and any number of things that we may want to achieve. But, jumping to the diet solution is not the answer. It may well be that you stay on the diet as you planned but other than your clothes fitting a little better, you haven't solved anything.

6 – Characters: Who Did This Happen To?

The Importance of Characters

Characters are the single most important element of any story. They are even more important than the plot or the theme. The reason for this is that you can have a story about characters without having a theme, or even a plot, but it would be difficult to explore any theme or reveal any plot without characters. This bold statement requires some justification. First, let us consider what happens when characters drive the story. A writer may create a story by creating a collection of characters in a given situation and simply letting them evolve. The writer may not have a point and the theme may well emerge organically. Similarly, the sequence of events may also emerge from their interactions. This kind of story is not uncommon and the writer, while writing the story, may have no better idea of the plot or the theme than the reader does while reading it. Once completed, it may be unclear what actually happened (weak plot) or it may be unclear exactly what the point of the story was (ambiguous theme). The point here is that you can leave out plot and theme when you begin a story but you cannot leave out the characters.

Now let's turn this around and see what would happen if the plot was strong but the characters were weak. Note, that we are not leaving out the characters we are just reducing their importance. Mystery stories are good examples of strong plotting with weaker characters. However, there are characters and to the extent that the characters are well developed, the stories move from the realm of simple diversion to the more desirable realm of having literary value. That is we can learn something about ourselves from a mystery story with well developed characters and are simply entertained by such a story if it only has a good plot.

The characters are who the events of the story occur to and the readers will care about the story because they care about the characters. An author may write a story to explore an issue. He or she may create a cast of characters, put them in a situation and see where it goes. In this case the theme will emerge from the interactions of the characters. And it is possible to have a compelling and meaningful story where the theme is not all that obvious. On the other hand, if you wish to explore a theme, you simply cannot explore it without characters. It may be possible to use non human characters but even in those cases the non human characters have anthropomorphic characteristics so the reader can relate to them. Pushing this idea a little further, consider trying to make a compelling case for a narrative argument just using a setting. Perhaps the setting is diminished in some way. Perhaps you want to make the reader care about the setting and what happens to it. Even this would be difficult unless there were characters in the story that cared about the setting and the reader cared about or could relate to the characters.

Characters engage the reader emotionally. Later in this book we will examine the role of emotion in reasoning. But for now we will simply state that emotional engagement in a narrative argument is crucial. The reader must care about your characters and what happens to them. In order for that to happen, the characters must be believable and realistic. Further, since we are writing stories to explore

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ethical issues, the notion of character becomes more important. Virtue ethicists believe that character plays a role in determining the ethical status of an act. For example, if a horrible person told a lie, we might well assume the worst about it. However, if a good person told a lie we might be inclined to think there are good reasons and question whether telling a lie is always a bad thing. This is useful as we explore ethics because it helps us get past our current prejudices regarding ethical issues. If a good person runs counter to our prejudice it may well cause us to question our current position. If one is a consequentialist or deontologist on the other hand, the characters may become less important and the plot may be the element they focus on.

We have all met memorable characters in fiction that we might see as good people in bad situations. Some examples include Huckleberry Finn, Oliver Twist, George Milton and, possibly, Madame Bovary. When we see these sympathetic characters in difficult circumstances it forces us to question the circumstances rather than the character.

Some Standard Roles

We begin by developing a vocabulary for some of the generic types of characters that we might use to make our narrative argument. We often hear words like protagonist and antagonist, archetype and stereotype, or bit player used when discussing characters. In this section we will define the roles more clearly and view them as elements of the cast of characters or, in keeping with our teleological approach, a decomposition of the character element.

The protagonist is the main character. It is, primarily, who the story is about. If we think of a story, simplistically, as a character who encounters a conflict in attempting to achieve a goal, that character would be the protagonist. If the story has any richness there will actually be several characters who are attempting to achieve a variety of goals. And these characters may support or conflict with each other. But there should be one main character whose pursuit of a goal and whose conflicts provide the primary vehicle for exploring the theme of the story. An interesting exercise when exploring a story or a novel would be to pick different characters and ask how the story might be interpreted differently if different characters were viewed as the protagonist.

The antagonist blocks or frustrates the protagonist in the pursuit of his or her goals thus adding to the conflict, emotional tension, suspense and engagement in the story. The opposition can be competitive, meeting the protagonist head on or subversive, doing things behind the protagonist's back that weaken his or her chances of achieving their desired goal. Further, that opposition can be physical, behavioral or psychological.

While the protagonist and antagonist are central to the conflict and, hence, central to the plot, we often need other characters to carry out specific roles in the story. We can think of these as walk on characters or bit players. They walk on, do their job, and leave. Sometimes they walk on periodically throughout the whole story. But, we do not get to know them as well as we get to know the protagonist and antagonist. We get to know them only as well as we need to know them in order for them to do their jobs. The walk on may be a single event or it may be recurring. If the story stretches into a novel,

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we may get to know some of the walk on characters quite well. But, in a short story, we only get to know them as well as we need to for them to perform their function.

Another way to think about characters is in terms of archetypes and stereotypes. These are handy reusable component parts for story construction. They are components that we are familiar with before we read the story and as such provide some economy of expression for the writer. That is, if you use an archetype or stereotype you get all of its baggage for free. This can be a blessing or a curse depending on how carefully the reusability is handled.

Archetypes represent commonalities of human experience. They are defined by internal states that many, if not all, people share. Common archetypes include: the hero, the flawed hero, the searcher, the nurturing mother, a person caught between two worlds, the martyr, the mentor, the temptress, the mischievous imp, the rebel, and the troublemaker. Most of us see ourselves in these roles from time to time and can easily relate to them. They help us to organize and make sense out of our experiences. They can be useful to the writer in tapping into those common experiences to bring economical imagery into the story.

Stereotypes represent commonalities of human perception. They are defined by external characteristics that many, if not all, people have encountered. At the negative extreme, stereotypes can be thought of as prejudices when simplistic external behaviors are assigned by gender or to racial, ethnic, or age groups. However, less extreme and less offensive stereotypes can be useful and include: the 'yes' man, the sycophant, the tattletale, the moralist, the coward, the self righteous, or the misfit. We do not get to know the stereotype character very well. They play a role in the story that can be thought of as a life size cardboard cutout of a character. They present the desired image or impression but are two dimensional.

Before leaving the cast of characters two additional points bear making. The first is that fictional characters are usually far better defined than real people. They are idealized clusters of character traits. Real people are complex, inconsistent, hard to figure out, and often downright confusing. Real people make terrible stories. Second, when describing fictional characters you need to show all that is necessary to create the desired impression and nothing more. Economy and precision of expression are key in defining memorable characters.

Basis of Believability

Disney Company CEO Michael Eisner described the Disney MGM Studios as "a Hollywood that never was--and always will be". This is a delightful recognition of the nature of fiction. When creating characters, we want to create people who never were but always will be. The characters we create could NOT exist in the real world and yet we need to feel like we have known every one of them. Why is this? To begin with real people are inconsistent and hard to figure out. They can be contrary or act from unseen motives. Characters in a story do not get to do this. When we say that we have known somebody like a character in a story, what we really mean is that we have seen these traits in people we know. As real people they would simply not work. Imagine what it would be like to have Huckleberry Finn, or Oliver Twist or Madame Bovary as you best friend. It simply would not work. These characters

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are not real people. They are, instead, clusters of human traits brought together to advance a narrative argument. And yet, we still need to make these characters believable. How do we do that?

The answer is actually very simple – carefully chosen details. We sketch out the character in carefully chosen verbal brush strokes. We should provide everything that is needed to understand the character and not a thing more. When I was in undergraduate school, there was an art major down the hall from me in my dorm who had an interesting assignment that I remember to this day. The assignment was to sketch the cover of a record album, which he did. Upon turning in the assignment he was instructed for the next assignment to sketch the same picture using only half as many lines. This continued several times until the final assignment only had a fraction of the lines used in the first one. Yet, the final assignment was equally as recognizable at the first assignment. The point of the assignment was to show that most of the lines in original were not necessary. This lesson can be applied equally as well to characters in fiction. Do not provide any details that are not absolutely necessary to reveal your character to your reader. This is beginning to sound minimalist and that is not what I am saying. I am emphasizing economy rather than minimalism. Make sure that your reader is thoroughly introduced to your character but do it in as economical way as possible.

What kind of name should your character have? Emerson Farnsworth creates a very different image than just plain Bobby. What kind of clothes would this character wear? What would they have for breakfast? What formative events may have occurred in his or her life? Does he have any quirks that annoy other people? Does she have any emotional conflicts or secrets that only good friends know about? Is your character educated or uneducated, good with other people or a loner, intellectually curious or dull witted? These are but a few of the questions that you may ask as you get to know your character. And, of course, you must ask which of these issues are important. Which of these issues reveal something of importance about your character? If your character carries his lunch every day because he is frugal, that may be important. If your character carries her lunch because everyone else does, that may be important. And, at the same time, it may not be important. You have to decide.

Show, Don't Tell

The “Show, Don't Tell” rule is almost a mantra in creative writing. And it is one of the most common mistakes made by students who are used to analytical writing. Their stories more often sound like newspaper reports or documentaries than they do like stories. And the main problem is that they tell you what they want you to know rather than showing you. Consider the follow two statements:

- 1) Henry was a slob.
- 2) Henry absentmindedly balled up the piece of paper and tossed it at the trashcan. It hit the rim and bounced on to the floor where it remained. Then, ignoring the paper, he looked down at his chest and picked off a piece of dried something from lunch from his shirt. Next to the bit of food was a long dried stain. He absentmindedly rubbed at it with his forefinger which did little to affect the stain but added newsprint from his fingers to the montage of smudges and splotches adorning his chest. If cleanliness is next to godliness, Henry had much penance to do.

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Note how the first statement is much more economical but fails to reveal the character to us. The second firmly implants aspects of Henry's character in our minds, but take more time to do. Although we need to balance economy with effectiveness, it is best to reveal the character to the reader rather than just tell the reader.

Raising the Emotional Stakes

An important element in exploring ethics through stories is to get the reader engaged emotionally with the characters. This is because emotion plays a large role in ethical reasoning. In order to engage the reader emotionally, you can have the character suffer or sacrifice something. You can put them in jeopardy. You can have them experience internal conflicts or social tensions. Readers can relate to these experiences as most people have been in similar circumstances and putting your character in those circumstances reminds the reader of how he or she felt.

Where Do Characters Come From?

Finally, we ask – where do characters come from? Writers are often asked this question and there are a number of answers each of which may apply to different situations or appeal to different writers. For new writers there are two approaches to consider: people you have known and characters you have read about. You can begin with someone you know and let the character evolve. It may be best when using this approach to not let the person you are using know. The character will evolve on its own and you may not be able to control it. Further, the person who you used as a model may not like the final product. I once had a petit female teaching assistant who I turned into a trained assassin in a story. I don't think it went over very well. You can also use characters that you have read about. Begin with a well known character, say Huckleberry Finn, and ask, how would this character behave in a corporate setting, or as an academic, or as a celebrity. Then let the character evolve. When using somebody else's character you want to be careful not to just copy the character. Put it in a new situation and see how it evolves.

For more experienced writers or writers who have had a little more practice, the answer would be that characters come from your imagination. As you gain more experience creating characters it will become easier to imagine them without having to let them evolve from known characters. And the final answer is, of course, that characters should be created to satisfy your objectives; although that may take a little more experience and practice.

Character Objectives

In the previous chapter we identified the need for a quirky character who might be at a disadvantage if co-workers could read his thoughts and a shy introverted character who cannot speak up for herself and who might be better off if people could know what she was thinking. We are going to name the quirky character Brashton Xavier Toomey and the shy introverted one Louise Brown. We will call Brashton "Brash" for short and Louise will be called Lou. Note how the name "Brash" is unusual and can be taken not only as a nickname but as a character trait. We can also have the co workers play with the name a bit. Brash X Too or Brash times 2 is one possibility. Brash Toomey or Brash to me is another. This allows

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us to have the co-workers contribute to his sense of quirkiness and the good natured kidding can contribute to his likeability. Note, in contrast, how the name “Lou” is as understated and nondescript as the character.

As we think about story objectives, consider the following examples of the types of objectives applied to the character of Brash:

1) Component Objectives

- a. Brash must be the kind of person that would have his quirkiness tolerated
 - i. He will come from a good family with a good education
 - ii. He will have artistic tendencies
 - iii. He will dress in a unique manner but not over the top
 - iv. He will do little things that endear him with his co-workers despite his quirkiness

2) Competing Objectives

- a. Brash is quirky
- b. but likeable.
 - i. Too much quirkiness might make him annoying
 - ii. Too much likeable may drown out the quirkiness
 - iii. How Much of Each?
 - iv. We need to find an almost even balance between these two traits. If we err on one side it should be on the side of quirkiness

3) Constraining Objectives

- a. The story cannot be about just one of the characters. We need to balance the two
- b. We need to minimize the interaction between the two main characters as the complexity of that interaction would almost certainly complicate the story.
- c. We need to introduce each character as fully as possible with as few brush strokes as possible since the point of the story is the complexities of mind reading and not a psychological study of either character.

Ideally, you should write down your objectives and review them often as you write the story. If the story begins to diverge from the objectives you should change them and make sure that the new objectives will still solve the problem you have articulated. After the story is written, you should go back, once again, and insure that the story does, indeed, satisfy the objectives.

Writing Stories versus Writing Software

Earlier in this book I claimed that the approach to writing presented here is modeled on the process by which software is developed. In the top down approach to writing software, you articulate the

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requirements of the software and then develop software to meet those requirements. However, this is not the only approach, perhaps not even the most common today. The other approach is called prototyping. The premise in prototyping is that there is too much uncertainty in the application to simply spell out the requirements and then build software to meet those requirements. The uncertainty may come from a variety of places. The application may not be well understood. The technology may not be well understood. Even if the application and technology are well understood, the developers may be new to either or both. In the cases of high uncertainty, prototyping allows you to reduce uncertainty in an iterative fashion. Build, learn, build, learn and so on. This is actually no different in writing stories. We prototype to reduce uncertainty. The only difference is that in writing we call the prototype a rough draft.

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7 – Point of View

What Is Point of View

Point of View is the perspective from which a story is told or the eyes through which the story is seen. And while the selection of point of view may seem obvious, it must be a carefully made decision. The impact of the story will be very different if told from various points of view. Consider the following scenario. There is a scuffle on the sidewalk between two young men. In addition, there are two bystanders, one of whom knows the two boys and one of whom who doesn't. Now, you break up the scuffle and ask the two boys, one at a time, what happened. You are likely to get two very different perspectives each of which is sympathetic to the one relating the incidents. The bystander who does not know the two boys and has no particular bias will relate the events in a way that is more objective and less sympathetic to either boy. At the same time, it will be devoid of context. The bystander who knows the two boys may, in turn, provide some useful context by providing some background for the scuffle, possible motives, and possibly some history. While this analogy is not perfect we can roughly correlate the accounts of the two boys with a first person point of view. The bystander who does not know the boys can only report what he or she has seen and is a third person limited point of view. The bystander who knows the boys and can provide some background as well as insight into motives is like a third person omniscient narrative. Actually, third person omniscient narrators can see a lot more than any person could ever see in reality. So, the analogy only works to a point. However, it does show how different points of view provide very different accounts and very different perspectives.

Points of View

First person point of view is the protagonist or a main character relating the story from his or her perspective. It is easily recognizable as the narrator will say "I did this" or "I did that". It is told from the "I" perspective. Second person is very rare and is of the form "You did this" or "You did that". This is a difficult perspective from which to relate a story and is most likely used as a creative experiment on the part of the author. Third person is the most common and is of the form "He or she did this" or "He or she did that". The third person narrator usually relates the events of the story but does not participate in them.

In first person narration, the story is seen through the eyes of the narrator. It is, thus, more sympathetic to the narrator. This is a benefit when we are trying to reveal a less popular side of an ethical problem. If we create a sympathetic narrator we are more likely to consider his or her side of the issue. However, first person narration has some limitations that can make it difficult. First of all, you can only see or know what the narrator can see or know. Thus, the narrator must be present at all major events. And the narrator cannot relate key information unless there is some way that he or she would know this information. In addition, the narrator can reveal his or her thoughts and feeling or past information. But the narrator would not know the thoughts or feeling of other characters unless the other characters provided them in some way. And the first person narrator would not know the history of another character unless the narrator knew the other character. Finally, the story telling style must be consistent

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with the character of the narrator. If the narrator is a rough and tumble character, the story must be told in a rough and tumble manner.

With a third person point of view, the narrator relates the story but does not participate in it. The narrator is more like a disembodied reporter relating the events of the story. This provides a more objective perspective and makes the story more believable. So, we trade greater sympathy for the main character for greater believability in the story. Although most people do not think about this while reading a story, the narrator reveals what he or she wants to reveal in order to create the desired impression upon the reader. So, we are really getting a very biased account with third person, but it feels more objective.

There are two forms of third person – limited and omniscient. The third person limited narrator can only reveal what a reporter at the scene could reveal. While this is not as limiting as first person, where the narrator has to be present at every key scene, it does create other limitations. For example, the third person limited narrator cannot know the thoughts, motives or history of characters. They can only report what they see. The third person omniscient narrator, on the other hand, knows all and can reveal anything he or she wants to reveal including inner thoughts and feelings of the characters, motives, and history. The third person omniscient narrator knows more about the characters than the characters know about themselves. It seems like third person omniscient would be a preferred choice because it has fewer limitations. However, in keeping with the notion of literary economy, one should not use anything that they don't need. Third person omniscient should not be used unless the things that the narrator would reveal are necessary in the story and cannot be revealed in other ways.

There are two main drawbacks of third person omniscient that must be considered when choosing this point of view. First, it facilitates presentation over representing or, in more common terms, telling over showing. Early I pointed out that the writer should reveal the characters to the reader rather than just tell the reader about the characters. This is the "Show Don't Tell" rule. Since the third person narrator is like a reporter observing the action, the writer may be lulled into simply telling the story rather than revealing it through characters, actions and dialog. It is important that the reader experience the story rather than simply be told the story. Secondly, third person exchanges time for distance. Since the narrator does not act like a reporter, it is possible to sneak in some useful information by just telling the reader. While this should not be overdone, as it violates the "Show Don't Tell" rule, it can be an economical way of moving the story along. But, as we tell the reader things that they should experience, the readers become more distant from the story. So, we, in effect, trade time for distance.

The choice of point of view should be considered seriously as different points of view will yield very different stories. To see this more clearly think about any great novel you have read and imagine what it would be like told from the various points of view of the various characters. It becomes a different story with each telling. Imagine the story of Huckleberry Finn, for example, told from the perspective of various different characters. Or imagine it being told from a third person omniscient point of view instead of first person. Would we really care that much about Huckleberry if we didn't hear the story from his perspective? Different points of view will produce very different results and you want to select a point of view that tells the story that you want to tell.

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Point of View and the Mind Reading Story

The mind reading story presents us with some interesting problems with regard to point of view. Telling the story from a first person point of view makes the narrator more sympathetic to the reader but limits what can be told as the narrator will not have access to events where he or she is not present and will not know the past or inner thoughts of the other characters. Telling the story from a third person point of view allows the reader access to more information and feels more objective. But it also makes the reader feel a bit more detached from the issue being explored. Our story, as described so far, presents us with a challenge in selecting the point of view.

If we had just one sympathetic character (the quirky one) we might say something like – we are going to tell this story from the first person point of view of the antagonist in order to gain sympathy for the awkward position he has been put in allowing his co-workers to know his fleeting but quirky thought. However, that draws all the sympathy to the one character and leaves the other at a disadvantage. If we were bold, we might try two first person perspectives alternative between the two main characters. However, that would be a significant challenge and that kind of approach should be left to more advanced writers. So, we must abandon first person in favor of third person.

The next question is – should we use third person limited or third person omniscient? Since everyone in the story can read the thoughts of others, it would be silly not to allow the narrator to do so as well. So, we will choose third person omniscient as our point of view.

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8 – Plot: How Did This Happen?

What Is a Plot?

A plot, in simple terms, is a sequence of events or behaviors that bring a character to a point of crisis and then show how the character dealt with the crisis. An overly cited remark by E.M. Forster reveals the essence of plot.

According to E.M. Forster:

The King died and the Queen died is a story

The King died and the Queen died of grief is a plot

I do not agree entirely with this observation. However, it does show us the essence of plot. A plot reveals causality in human experience. It allows us to think about how we might handle the crisis ourselves.

Consider these alternative story lines:

The King died and then it rained.

The King died and Queen was told about it.

The King died and somewhere else in the kingdom someone else died.

None of these alternatives are particularly engaging because they do not reflect any causality between the events and by implication do not allow us to ponder how we would handle such events. The plot gives us a structure for a series of meaningful events based on human behavior and experience. It also provides us with an opportunity to consider how we would have navigated this series of events. It allows us to practice for eventualities or compare how we have done in the past with how the characters are handling it.

So, in general, we will see a plot as a narrative causal argument explaining how a character encountered and resolved a conflict. In the case at hand, when we are writing stories to explore the ethics of technology, the conflict will be an ethical one. In general this will not always be the case. Most conflicts we face are not ethical conflicts. We may have conflicts in the process of personal growth (what kind of person do I want to be?) or in any number of the problems that life throws at us (how do I deal with this situation?). Without conflict you do not have a plot. Everything was fine and continued to be fine is a terrible plot and would result in a boring story. Since conflict is such an important part of a plot, we will examine the notion of conflict in greater detail.

What Is Conflict?

Conflict occurs, in a story, when a person is attempting to achieve a goal but their efforts are blocked or frustrated by some kind of a barrier. That barrier could be another person, society, nature or even the character himself. If it is the character himself, the barrier could be physical, emotional, psychological or

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a belief system. These are not all the possibilities for conflict but are given to show that conflict can arise from many sources. While characters make the reader care about the story, it is the conflict that brings them to read it in the first place. While the story is about characters, it is about characters in conflict. Consider the following two scenarios and ask yourself which you would like to know more about.

Without Conflict

Jane was a likeable young woman. She was pleasant, respectful and intelligent. Everything about her life was fine and would continue to go well

With Conflict

Jane was a likeable young woman. She was pleasant, respectful and intelligent. Everything about her life that was familiar and comfortable was about to change pushing her to the limits of her endurance and causing her to become someone she never thought she would or could be.

Which story would you rather read? You don't have to answer because I already know the answer. While we all have some basic level of caring about others, we are not really interested in things that are going well. The first scenario without conflict sounds extremely uninteresting. We may be glad that things are going well for Jane. But, we are not really interested in hearing more about it. However, in the second scenario, with conflict, we want to know more. What is going to happen? How will Jane handle it? Will she be affected in any important ways? How will her life change? How will she come to grips with it all? Who will she become? Yes, we are much more interested in conflict than we are in sameness. And there is a good reason for this.

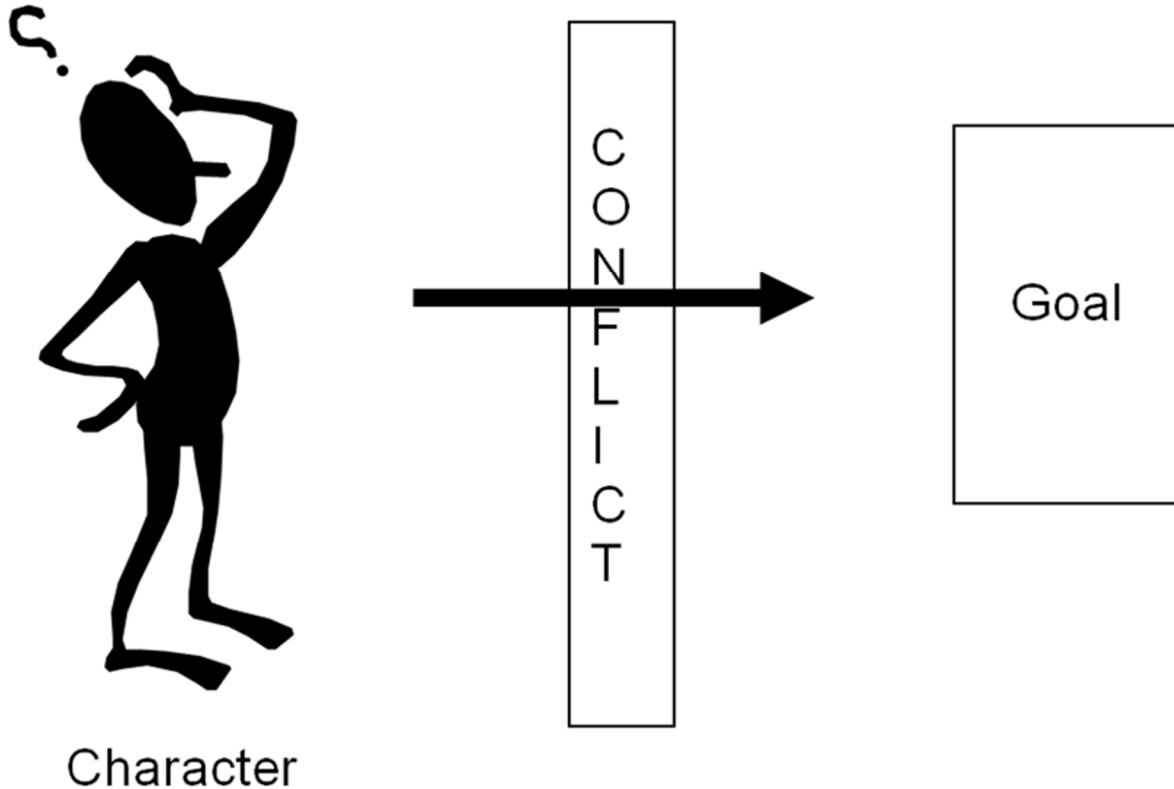
Why Do We Like Conflict So Much?

Without getting too much into the psychology of it, I think it is fair to say that most people like to rehearse potential future events in their minds as a means of preparing for them. If you are expecting an unpleasant encounter with someone, you might rehearse that event in your mind with a standard "I said this and she said that" scenario. Or, if you are nervous about meeting someone, you may rehearse the meeting in your mind. Most people do this without thinking and without really trying. There is some sort of underlying belief that if we rehearse the event we will be better prepared for it. We like conflict in stories because it is a rehearsal for us in the event that we ever find ourselves in such a situation. We might agree with how the characters handled the conflict. We might disagree. We might come up with ways in which we would handle it better. But we like the vicarious safety of conflict in stories because it allows us to prepare for future potential events from a safe distance.

Aristotle offers another reason why we may find conflict in a story so compelling. The reader, according to Aristotle's view, experiences an emotional catharsis or a release of pent up emotional energy. We all walk around with lots of emotional conflicts that need resolution. When we experience a conflict in a story we can release pent up emotion energy that is derived from subconscious emotional conflicts. So, a good story, to put it crudely, is like a welcome emotional belch. We just feel better afterwards.

The Conflict Model

The simplest conflict model involves a character, who has a goal, and something is blocking him or her from achieving that goal. What does the character want to accomplish? Why does it matter? What is at stake for the character? What gets in the way? Is it surmountable? Does the character have what it takes? Can the reader relate to the characters situation? Let's consider these one at a time.



What does the character want to accomplish? Without goals, there is no conflict. If everything is fine and the character is happy with the way things are we not only do not have conflict, we don't have a story. Generally, although not always, the conflict will lead to personal growth. Since most people believe that personal growth is an important thing, the conflict will matter because, if it is not overcome, the character will not evolve or grow. However, the challenge must be something worth overcoming. If the character just wants to learn to hold her breath for two minutes, it is not much of a challenge. If she manages to do it, it is not that impressive. And if she fails, not much is lost. However, if she belongs to a family of pearl divers and must hold her breath for two minutes to reach a certain depth, the challenge takes on more meaning. If she has further problems such as asthma or panic attacks, it becomes a greater challenge. And, if failure to achieve the goal also means a failure to be fully accepted by her family, the stakes become higher. Ultimately, the challenge must be in reach and the character must show she has what it takes by overcoming the situation.

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Standard Conflicts

In short stories and novels there are some standard conflicts that we encounter. These are typically person versus person, a person against society, a person against nature, or even a person against himself. A typical person versus person conflict would be the protagonist pursuing a goal and the antagonist blocking it. A person against society conflict could be a rebel against established norms, a person who does not fit, a person whose personal development is stunted by oppressive social norms, or something of the kind. A great example of a person versus nature conflict is Jack London's short story *To Build a Fire*. Here a person is struggling to build a fire to keep from freezing to death, although it is substantially more interesting than that simple line makes it sound. Finally, we can have a person against himself with internal conflicts or psychological barriers.

When writing stories on ethical themes we can add a collection of standard ethical conflicts. These include such things as person versus role, role versus role, personal versus social, general versus specific, or competing interests. This list is not intended to be exhaustive and readers may well add some of their own. An example of a person versus role conflict would be when a person cannot resolve the differences between how they would act as person and how they should act in order to fulfill the obligations of their role. Let's say you are a manager of a small department of employees that has a charity fund of some kind. Perhaps they toss a quarter in a jar each time they say something that would have been better left unsaid. An employee of yours, who is basically a decent person but has fallen on difficult times, has been caught taking money from the fund. As a person you may feel that compassion is the right response. You may even feel charitable and offer to replace the missing money yourself. As a manager you have obligations to the other employees and obligations to maintain order in the department. In this case some disciplinary response might be more appropriate. What do you do? Well, it is not clear, which is why it is an ethical conflict.

We all find ourselves in role versus role conflict. The demands of being a parent often conflict with the demands of our professions. The demands of our professions sometimes conflict with our role in society. What if you are a parent, a professional, a publically elected official, and the treasurer of your homeowner's association? It does not take much imagination to see the conflicts that would arise from those roles. Similarly, with a little imagination one can see how the other conflicts listed above might arise.

The point here is that we all face any number of conflicts in the course of our daily lives. Some are ethical conflicts, some are not. Further, very few of these conflicts, if any, are unique to any of us. They are all pretty standard conflicts that are just part of life. Since they are common conflicts we like to hear how others have dealt with them. And the lure of stories is that we can see how others have handled these conflicts in hopes that we will be better prepared to handle them ourselves.

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Traditional Elements of a Plot

The traditional elements of a plot in 1) Rising Action; 2) Climax; 3) Falling Action; 4) Resolution; and 5) Reflection and Interpretation. We can now see these elements in terms of the central conflict. The rising action includes the events that led up to the conflict. In a short story, it is important to only include relevant events because you will unnecessarily distract the reader if you include events that are not relevant to the conflict. The climax is where the conflict manifests itself or when the crisis can no longer be denied or avoided. The falling action is those events following the climax when the protagonist is wrestling with how to deal with the problem. The resolution is how the problem or conflict is dealt with. Hopefully, the resolution will give us some insight into human nature and how we might best handle such a conflict if we were faced with it. Finally, in the reflection and interpretation we ponder larger issues such as did the protagonist handle the conflict in the best way. It may also explore how would we behave differently or if we would have the courage to behave as the protagonist did if we were in a similar situation.

It is important to note that not every story will include every element. You use the rising action, for example, to build up to a conflict. You may wish to skip that and dump the reader in media res or right in the middle of the mess. You may skip the resolution if you want to leave the reader hanging with regard to the resolution of the conflict. Most stories leave out the final element of reflection and interpretation as that is usually left to book circles or English classes.

Making the Conflict More Compelling

Since conflict is the primary reason why someone might read your story, you want to make it as compelling as you can. Following are some tips for raising the stakes in your story. First, you can make the goal more compelling. In the example used earlier about a character learning to hold her breath, this goal by its is not very compelling. However, learning to hold her breath to be accepted by her family is. And if she not only has to face rejection from her family but may also need to leave home, the stakes are even greater. If leaving home forces her into circumstances that she would rather avoid, it becomes even more compelling. Second, you can engage the interest of the reader by making the character more likeable. If she is lazy, ill tempered, or dishonest we may not want to root for her. But, if she is well liked, hard working, and good natured we may care more about the outcome. Third, you can trap the character into facing the conflict by eliminating other options. If the pearl diver is trying to get into the family business because she doesn't want to leave home to go to college, then it is more difficult to relate to the conflict. Isolating the character from peers and family where she might find support also makes the conflict more poignant. And finally, creating some suspense will also heighten the interest of the reader. For example, suppose the family needs her to work with them so they can pay off a mortgage which is overdue. The bank keeps raising the pressure on the family and the clock begins to tick for the character to overcome her conflict.

Summary

In this chapter we looked at the elements of plot focusing on conflict which is the central element. A plot, in simple terms, is a sequence of events or behaviors that bring a character to a point of crisis and

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then show how the character dealt with the crisis. We care about characters in crisis because we hope to learn from the characters behaviors how we might handle a similar crisis.

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9 – Setting: Where Could Such a Thing Happen

Why Setting Is Important

Characters are the *most* important element of a story because people will care about what happens in the story if they care about the characters. Plot is second, because it is what happens to the characters that the reader cares about. Setting is third in the priority lists because it is where the story occurs. In fact, the setting provides a place for the story to occur and without a setting there would be no story. Just because it is third on the list does not mean that it is not important. The story has to occur somewhere and the setting is where it occurs. Mystery writer Susan Dunlap once said “A story is in its setting because it could be nowhere else.” This seems obvious but it is a non trivial observation. Madame Bovary would not have worked in a 5th Avenue condo in New York City. Huckleberry Finn could not have taken a raft trip down the Danube. And Oliver Twist would have just been another delinquent kid in the mid 20th century.

Some authors promote setting to first place providing a “sense of place” where the readers experience of the location of the story. An example might be a story intended to have the reader experience the mystical grandeur of nature in a wilderness setting. Another possibility would be to have the reader experience the struggles of living in an inner city slum. Note, that you can have the reader experience the unpleasantness of an inner city slum without ever really getting to know any of the characters. Having faceless characters in this setting might even help in creating a sense of helplessness or failure to thrive. However, in the case of writing stories to explore the ethics of technology, we are going to stick with the priority scheme provided above where the setting is in third place. Ethical conflicts happen to people not settings and we need to keep that in perspective.

In addition, setting provides three additional benefits. First, it enhances the unity of the story by providing a sense of place. Second, it increases reader involvement. And, third, it stimulates both the writer’s and the reader’s imagination.

Choosing a Setting

Choosing a setting may seem fairly obvious, and while I have no desire to make it any more complicated than absolutely necessary, I do need to point out that the choice of setting, like the choice of point of view is a little trickier than one might first imagine. Setting should not be the first decision that one makes when writing a story. The exception to this, of course, is when one is writing a story to explore a sense of place. But, that is beyond what we are trying to do in this book. So, we will leave the setting until after we have selected the characters and sketched out the plot. The plot is the main driver in the selection of the setting as we need to ask ‘where would such events occur?’ As we consider various setting options we have to make sure they are not inconsistent with the characters, but events are the main consideration.

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An interesting what-if game to play with setting is to see how the story might change if we forced it into unusual settings. For example, consider the story of Huckleberry Finn. How would this work if he were a homeless person traveling on a New York subway? How would this work if he were on a motorcycle traveling across the United States? What if we replaced the motorcycle with a Winnebago? Could we set the story in Medieval Wales and put him on a donkey? Changes in the setting will change the story; sometimes for the better, sometimes not.

Describing the Setting

We must always keep in mind that the reader is not reading the story for the setting. They are reading the story to find out how the characters got through the conflict. Any time required to read about the setting is time taken away from the main story. So, setting information should be chosen very carefully and provide only what is needed to create the environment in the mind of the reader and no more. The key to doing this is to have an eye for essential details. If you walk into a Starbucks and notice the smell of coffee, you have identified an essential detail. If you walk into a Starbucks and notice the pattern on the linoleum tile, you are missing the point.

We can describe the setting in terms of three sets of observations: physical, mental and social. The physical items exist in the world. The mental items are psychological factors that exist in the minds of the characters. And the social items are the shared beliefs that exist in the social reality. Let's consider each one in turn.

The physical setting includes all sensory aspects. How does it look? How does it sound? How does it smell? Are there unusual elements that define the setting? Consider the following descriptions and how they impact the sense of place.

Visual

The midday sun reflected harshly off the chrome and glass that protected the identities, sins and motives of those behind the reflective mask.

There was a simple honesty to the fading wallpapered walls of the historic brownstone.

Sound and smell

As I closed the door the sounds of traffic – beeping, sirens, and screeching tires – was left behind in the world of the frantically living

The musty townhouse smelled like my grandmother's basement – honest, caring and a little behind the times

Mental or psychological aspects of the setting give us some insight into what is going on in the minds of the people in the setting. What do the people think about? Are they conformist or free spirits? Are they individualistic or community oriented. Do they express their thoughts or keep their ideas to themselves?

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What is considered normal behavior in this setting? If you talk to them will you get to know them or will you be presented with an appropriate image? Are there prevailing beliefs or attitudes? If you were to visit this setting, how would you be affected emotionally? How would you describe the personality of a typical resident? Is there a typical resident or are they all very different?

The social aspects of the setting include the sociological factors that define the lives of the residents. Are they rich or poor; educated or uneducated? Are they conservative or liberal? Is there a dominant religion or entrenched social norms? How do they feel about strangers? If you moved there would you be readily accepted or would you be forever a stranger?

Where Do Settings Come From

Settings, like characters, come from your experience. You can use places you have lived or places you have been. If you haven't been to many places then perhaps you can rely on places that you have read about or seen in movies. If you have lived in the same house all your life, never traveled and never read much, then coming up with a good setting may be a challenge. However, some settings, such as those provided in science fiction or fantasy are entirely a product of the writer's imagination. Ultimately, the setting must satisfy your objectives. And regardless of how difficult or effortless it is to create the setting, that is the final test. If it satisfied your objectives it is good. If not it isn't.

Summary

This chapter looked at the setting where your story is located focusing on its role as a place where your story might occur. Setting is third in importance after characters and plot and must not interfere with the narrative drive of the story. In order to provide a place for the story without interfering with the story it is important to identify key details that describe the setting as fully and economically as possible. Details can be selected from the physical aspect of the setting which included sensory features such as how it looks, sounds or smells. They can be selected from mental aspects which include the thoughts of people in the setting. Or they can be selected from social factors which define the social structures within which the people in the setting live.

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10 – Putting It All Together

The Writing Process

As I mentioned earlier, in his classic work on *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner observes, “Fiction is made up of structural units; it is not one great rush”

The writer who sits down at the typewriter and types “It was an dark and stormy night” and then waits for the great rush is likely to experience what has become known as writer’s block. Often times writers can’t get the words out of their heads fast enough and other times there is nothing in their to write. The former we refer to as a visit from the muse. It might more accurately be referred to as ‘the writer has something to say’. The later we refer to as writer’s block. It might more accurately be referred to as ‘the writer’s head is empty’.

Consider an analogous situation. You were at a party where some dramatic event occurred. Let’s say that the party was crashed by three or four drunken teenagers who made a lot of noise, sang off key, and loudly lamented the chilliness of their reception. If someone asked you what happened, you would almost certainly not experience gossip’s block. A thing happened and you are more than willing to relate the events. You don’t experience gossip’s block because there is something in your head to relate and you are motivated to relate it. If, on the other hand, someone were to come up to you at the party (assuming no crashers this time) and ask you to make up a dramatic event, you might be at a loss to come up with anything. So, how do you get from having nothing to say to the point where you have something to say? There really is no magic to it. Just follow the process described here.

- 1) Define the problem you are trying to solve.
- 2) Define the general objectives of a story that will solve this problem.
- 3) Decompose your general objective into specific objectives for characters, plot and setting.
- 4) Identify a series of scenes through which you will reveal the characters, plot and setting.

Now, here comes the creative part. For each scene rehearse it in your head. How does the setting look? How do the characters behave? What are they wearing? What are they saying? What actions will take place? If you don’t know what is going to happen in the scene it is difficult to write about it. This does not mean that you have to know the scene in excruciating detail before you can write. But it does mean that you need a general idea. If you have a general idea of what will happen, you can start writing and let the muse kick in. If the muse does not kick in, you need to go back and think about the scene some more.

Your first draft of the scene is probably far from perfect. In order to improve it, you will have to reread it, revise it, and get feedback from an independent peer reviewer. When reading your own work you may know what you intended to say and may believe that you said it. It is not until another person reads it that you will know if you achieved your objectives or not.

Finally, here are a few tips to improve your writing process. First, set realistic goals. If you are going to write a story of five thousand words, you are not going to write it in one sitting. If you manage to write

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five hundred to a thousand words in a single sitting you are doing well. Once you have dried up for the day stop and don't torture yourself. Second, give yourself enough time. If you are trying to write a story of five thousand words and are writing five hundred to a thousand words a day, you will need five to ten days for the first draft. If you limit your expectations and allow yourself enough time, the writing process can be very pleasurable. If you force yourself into a marathon situation it can be agony. Third, allow time between rereads. You may reread as you write, but always allow at least one day between a draft and a reread. Whatever you have written will sound very different the next day and you will be more objective in your evaluation. Finally, get feedback from others. You are attempting to influence the reader with your story. You need to find out if you did influence them and if you influenced them in the way that you expected. The only way you can do this is to test it out.