The New Narrative: Applying narratology to the shaping of futures outputs

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A B S T R A C T

Both scenario development and design practices incorporate elements of storytelling, but this use remains undertheorised. This paper will draw upon literary theory, film theory and science fiction criticism to develop an analytical model of narrative structure and rhetorics which speaks to the concerns of scenario developers and designers when engaged in shaping the final outputs or deliverables of a futures project.

After highlighting the differing role of *telos* in art and futures and defining the metacategory of "narratives of futurity", this paper then defines the terms "story", "narrative", "narrator" and "world" in the literary context. It then shows how those concepts map onto futures practice, before going into detail regarding the variety of narrative strategies available across a range of different forms and media, and the qualitative effects that they can reproduce in audiences. There follows the construction of a 2×2 matrix based on the critical concepts of *narrative mode* and *narrative logic*, within which narratives of futurity might be usefully catalogued and compared, and from which certain broad conclusions may be reached as regards the relation between choice of medium and rhetorical effect. The implications of this analysis are explored in detail.

1. Introduction: futures, fiction and telos

Throughout history, people have used myths, symbols and metaphors to find shared meaning and connect with each other. Many of these stories have been retold, refined, reworked and reused over centuries, always changing with the times, but always talking to the common human experience.

Storytelling lies at the heart of scenario and design practices; while the media used may vary, and the styles even more so, both disciplines are engaged in the creation, analysis and critique of narratives—as shall be demonstrated. While no small amount of literature has been generated on the matter of the general reflexivity of futures studies as an academic discipline (see e.g. van der Heijden, 1996; Ramírez et al., 2010; Shell, 2008b), little or no literature exists which applies the the strategies and logics of narrative as understood by writers, cineastes and cultural scholars to the methods deployed by futures scholars and practitioners in the creation of their final outputs (One significant exception would be the work of Schroeder (2011), but it comes from a more instrumental angle).

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This paper begins addressing this shortfall by providing broad answers to the following three questions:

- What is the relationship in literary theory between stories, narratives, narrators and worlds, and how do these concepts map onto futures scenarios and designs?
- How might different narrative voices and points of view change the way in which an audience relates and ascribes meaning to a story?
- How do different media, narrative modalities and narrative logics change the rhetorical framing of a narrative of futurity?

The answers to these questions are not as distinct from one another as the list above might suggest. Art, and the methods of art, are intrinsically subjective, and the rules can be broken in art's own name. But the *telos* – the purposefulness or intent – of an art-work differs from that of a scenario suite or design project, in that the *telos* of a work of art is largely decided by the artist themselves, while the futurist is most often provided with the *telos* of the project by the client, whether directly (e.g. through a clear project brief) or indirectly (e.g. in the form of interests or questions that emerge through workshopping).

This is more important than it may initially appear, because where the artist may bend and break the rules just to see what happens, the futurist is obliged to shape their final deliverable(s) to the *telos* they are given. The artist can choose whether to evangelise or play Cassandra, whether to persuade or dissuade—but the futurist often has those choices made for them. Given that narrative and rhetoric are intimately related, the practising futurist needs to understand how certain narratological strategies – which are often closely entangled with choices of medium – affect their final outputs.

There is a necessary distinction to be made between *form* and *content* in futures practice. The *content* is the research data that informs the scenario or design, as filtered through and shaped by the research questions or analytical focus applied to it; the *form*, meanwhile, is the final output (or outputs), the narrative delivery system through which that data is presented to the audience. To frame those categories in a more practical setting, then, the content might be a collection of lists, matrices and mind-maps collated during a workshop with clients, while the form might be a set of pen-portrait summaries of some of the possible futures created by that process. Equally, the form might be a set of physical prototypes, a series of photos, images or renders, a short story, a video or film – or there might be multiple forms. One set of data may be analysed and presented in many different ways.

This paper is very specifically concerned with the role of narrative strategies and modes in the shaping of *final form*—the client- or audience-facing outputs that must meet the project brief. As such, the specific *telos* or focus of any given futures project is effectively irrelevant in the context of this analysis; the intention is not to tell practitioners what is right or wrong, but to enable them to decide for themselves which strategies are most likely to achieve their aims.

2. Method: a structural analysis of "narratives of futurity"

This paper is predominantly theoretical in approach, in that it gathers established ideas from literary theory, narratology, film theory and science fiction criticism, and attempts to apply them in a systematic fashion to the process of creating a final output from a futures project. These theories are considered to be basic components of the operational knowledge of fiction writers and film-makers, but appear to have made few inroads into the realm of futures scholarship and practice—perhaps because, while there is clearly a relationship between the narrative arts practised as art and the narrative arts practised as futures research tools, the exact nature of that relationship remains unclear. This paper attempts to both highlight and address that lack of clarity.

This approach relies on the conceptual metacategory of "narratives of futurity", and so it is important to clarify the distinction between "narratives of futurity" and "futures". Simply stated, the latter is a subset of the former, but there are some semantic issues to raise first.

As a catch-all term for the outputs of foresight practices – be they designs, prototypes, scenario sketches, videos, growth forecast plots – "futures" is succinct but problematic: it conflates the sign with the signified. The "futures" thus produced are not actual futures, but *subjective depictions of possibilities yet to be realised*; no matter how strongly backed with valid data, they are nonetheless speculations, extrapolations, imaginative works. They are not portrayals of "The Future"—firstly because there is no canonical definitive future to be portrayed, and secondly because (as will be discussed) all narratives are inherently partial, in both senses of that term. "Futures" are *fictions*—albeit fictions told for a different telos to that of the average fiction writer.

"Futurity", on the other hand, describes the effectively infinite range of possibilities represented by the forward continuation of temporality; if "futures" represent a large yet finite range of possibilities from which we might select the most favourable, "futurity" captures the possibility of the many variations or blendings to be found between (or even behind or beneath) the "futures" we can imagine easily. Or, to put it another way: to speak of "futures" is to admit the ghost of determinism to a temporal feast which, like the universe in which it takes place, is in fact stochastic; "futures" are implicitly normative, while "futurity" is illustrative. Nonetheless, "futures" is the accepted term of art in the foresight community, which is a strong argument in favour of its use. The argument for subordinating "futures" in the "narratives of futurity" metacategory, however, hinges on the way in which it reveals that "*futures*" *are not a special or unique type of text with regard to their aims and effects*.

As argued above, "futures" are speculative depictions of possibilities yet to be realised, as are "designs" (another problematically loose category); in this, they belong to a broader category of works that includes product prototypes,