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Narrative Structure for a Short Animation Film**

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## **Application of Life Experiences in the Creation of a Narrative Structure for a Short Animation Film**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to identify the application of life experiences based on the study of everyday behavioral patterns, gesture analysis, environments study, clothing and traditional music, into a script for a short animation film. This research explores a set of framework with pre-defined requirements that is used for the creation of a narrative structure, which is a set of chronologically placed staged action. The project consists of three stages. The first phase of the project involves the gathering of visual and audio references sighted from different locations, where several photographs and recorded sound of related contextual information for the idea development process have been taken. In addition, I also used reference materials from various sources as films, documentaries and newspapers for data and validation. The second phase of the research involves interviews of the ethnic people of the Darjeeling district in West Bengal, India. The final phase involves inference of the gathered information and combining it with fictional visualization, which subsequently, culminates into an animation narrative structure. By identifying the extraction of real life experiences and projecting it into a narrative structure, I am able to analyze the process of story creation in a much faster time. Hence, this application is able to be an example for independent short animation filmmakers to develop narrative structures based on real life experiences in a shorter time and lower down cost.

**Keywords:** Animation, Character Study, Idea Development, Narrative Structure, Plot Structure, Story Development.

## Introduction

A virtuous narrative structure is a combination of elements of storytelling in a film. It can be constructed by defining a certain predetermined set of requirements. These are the arrangements of causally related happenings that create stories. However typically, a decent story is inclined to consist of numerous significant features (Ma et al. 2012). These features may come from the elements of everyday events and uncommon experiences in our lives. This set of events composites into a non-fictional narration. Our stories originate from our profound experiences in life. Storytelling is the way in which individuals make sense of their experiences (McAdams 2001, Singer 2004, White 1989). This may include observations from our everyday happenings. When creating a narration, we need to remember and structure our thoughts and develop them into a plot. In order to enrich the content of a plot, we can identify the components of a narrative structure and link them to an articulate as a story. For example, the words we read, images we see, and gestures we decipher can support us to express a story (Chatman 1980). In this paper, I have divided the processes into three stages in relating our life experiences in a narrative structure.

**Figure 1.** *Narrative Structure Process*

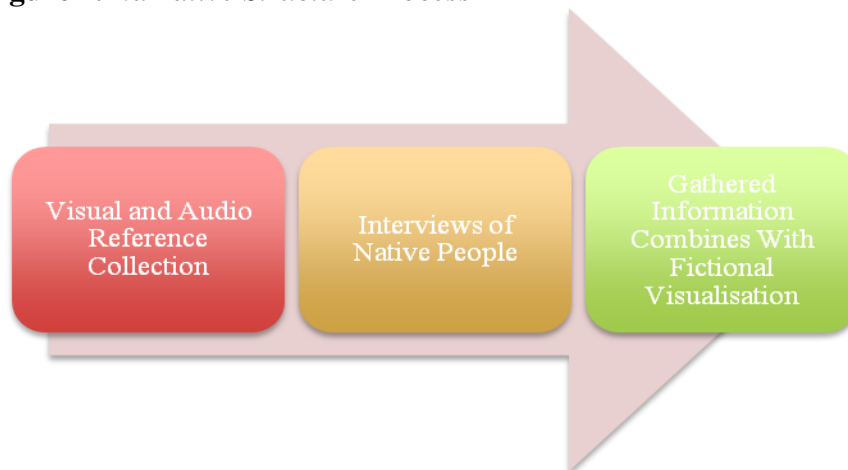


Figure 1 shows all the three processes are connected to each other. In the visual and audio reference collection section, I have travelled to a few places in Darjeeling, India to film the location on camera and also drew conceptual sketches of the places that I have visited. I did an analytical study of the height and proportions, color, textures, environments, nature, houses, animals, terrains and everyday life. This visually strengthened the ideas. In the interview section, I qualitatively interviewed a sample of 15 native people of different age groups from 16 to 45 years old. The questions were structured in relation to their emotional experiences of people living in Darjeeling. In the last section, I have summarized all the gathered information to make an imaginative narration with the influence of drama, comedy and adventure as a multitude of variables by putting them into the three-act structure. This method stimulates the emotional response among the audiences. Subsequently, after I completed the narrative structure from life experiences, I applied it into a 3D animation film.

## Design Analysis

### *Character Design*

In this section, I focused on the characters' identity, scenes, atmosphere, looks, feel, props design, traditional music analysis, color and texture processes. In order to understand a character, one has to understand the personality of the character, which includes the attitude they pose, the dress they wear and the way of their thinking. All these details will be very useful when creating the character design. For example, as my focus was on a traditional looking Bengali male character, therefore I studied the certain reference from real life sketching of the Bengali people and research their costumes from the internet. Some of the references are illustrated below.

**Figure 2.** *Dhoti (dollsofindia.com)*



Figure 2 illustrates a Bengali traditional costume, the Dhoti and Kurta. The textures, patterns and color in the dressing also depict the Bengali tradition. I have also learnt the technique of wearing a Dhoti (Figure 3). This process has helped me to model the character in 3D space.

**Figure 3.** *Dhoti Wearing Process (Staticdnaindia.com)*



During my observation of people wearing a traditional Bengali male dress during special occasions like marriage ceremony, festivals and travelling's, this kind of dressing gave another connection to my narrative structures identification of the character. For example, when the right hand of a Bengali man is held up to the chest, this is a common gesture of superiority while walking in public places (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** *Bengali Man in Dhoti and Kurta (wadiaplaces.blogspot.com)*



For the facial analysis, I have analyzed a famous traditional song (Samne wali khidki, film- Padosan) from Bollywood as shown in Figure 5. In the song, we can see a notorious Bengali male character singing and gesturing his hand with mid partition hairstyle while chewing paan.

**Figure 5.** *Padosan Film – (1968)*



In the close up picture (Figure 6), you can see the hair of the character is stuck together. Generally it is traditional practice that people apply oil in their hair. His mouth is red because of he was chewing paan which is made from betel leaf and areca nut. His mouth is salivary and the paan liquid is coming out of his mouth. These kinds of small events of characters personality that I have used in the narrative structure are to express the characters behaviors.

**Figure 6.** *Padosan Film – (1968)*



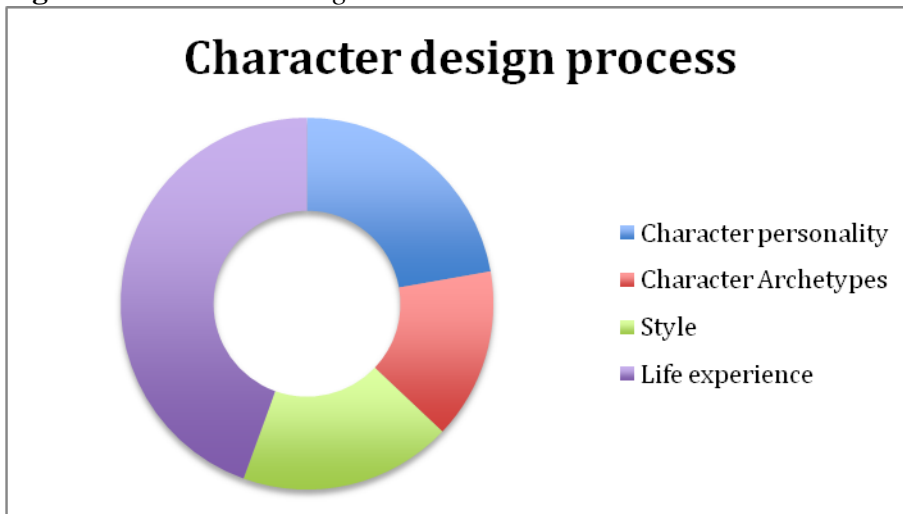
It is essential to create a character in a narrative structure, which people can relate to and find empathy with. It has to establish a bond, which makes us spot the character amongst us. Thus, a character must be designed in such a way that people can relate to on a very intimate level. The distinctive personality of a character drives the looks, walks, thinks and gestures. Finally, the 3D model of the Bengali character from my film is shown in Figure 7.

**Figure 7.** *Chase-O-Rama – (2011)*



Below is the character design process wheel.

**Figure 8.** *Character Design Process*



In Figure 8, I have given more emphasis on the life experiences section because the best way to make believable, realistic characters is to study our life experiences, which has to be followed by character personality, archetypes and stylization.

### *Conceptual Environment Design*

In this process, I have taken reference photographs of the environment surroundings from Darjeeling in West Bengal, India. When these visualizations are appropriately presented, it can be highly efficient in conveying narratives (Ma et al. 2012). Following it, I conceptualized the environment with elements including flora and fauna, tea gardens, terrains, ropeway and railway train. Environment design plays an important role in setting up the overall mood of the narrative structure. The image below shows Darjeeling. This type of reference provides us visual information about the locations where the story is going to take place. It also helps us understand the color palette and lighting settings. Environment design sets up over all stylization of the film. It is the basis of forming the theme and visualization. For example, the types of shapes, figures, lines, compositions and perspective set up the staging for the character. One of the key elements which go parallel with the environment is the lighting, as it affects the perception. Bright and colorful lightings show cheerfulness in films.

Whereas, dark colors suggest the dark moods and evil character. Lighting sets up the location and can also be used as indication. Another key component is the color palette, which brings out attention to the visual theme. Color is a strong expedient in a story as it affects us psychologically and physically without our understanding. Depending on the color palette, there can be harmony or tension in a scene. Certain colors are related with specific time, period and place. For example, warm colors give a cheerful and lively impression whereas cool colors give relaxing and calm one. As Darjeeling is a bright colored city, most of the lighting, color design and texture painting are done in bright spectrum of colors.

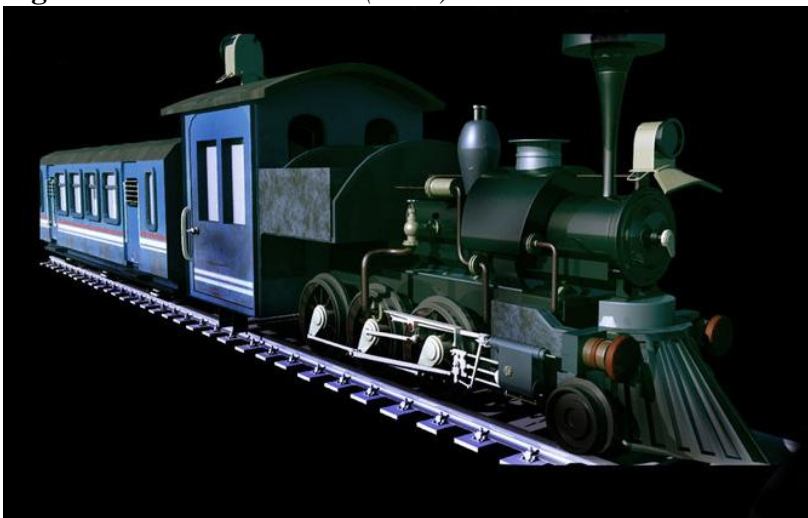


**Figure 9.** *Darjeeling City Toy Train (takeatravel.in)*



Figure 9 illustrates how I got the idea to adopt the train into the narrative structure, which I transformed into a 3D modeled train as shown in Figure 10. Therefore by referencing all these things we see and also from our life experiences, a huge visual library can be created which will be very useful when developing a narration.

**Figure 10.** *Chase-O-Rama (2011)*



### *Sound Design*

Sound has a major connection with the script when setting up a theme and mood. Sound compliments the narration as it helps in the story telling. Recording sound from an environment or surroundings always sets up the feel of the story. As Darjeeling is a lush green hill top town, sound of the birds, plants movement and the train have added depth to the narration. As the narration is for an animation film, adding some extra catchy sound will make the animation fun to watch. I have also added sound elements to create suspense, curiosity, character breathing, gun shots, giggles and burning sound. As this is an animation film, there is a mixed sound design. The experiences of hearing

sound around us and finding the connection with the narrative structure will enhance the story telling.

## Personal Interview

### *Qualitative Interview*

I conducted several open-ended interview sessions with the native people living in Darjeeling. The main idea of conducting the interview was to gather narrative information from the respondent's experiences and organize them into a story. Stories are not created from emptiness of spaces in the society; it originates from individuals experiences (Law et al. 2002). Hence, I wanted to learn their experiences. Interviews are very personal and they are conducted directly with the respondents. From the interview, I manage to gather different types of stories and fictional information. The aims of the interview were to obtain information on the participant's thoughts, feelings, experiences, ideas and preferences. During the interview, I asked several respondents about the types of traveling experiences in toy train that they have come across in Darjeeling. I received several answers such as sometimes wild animals (deer) enter the train. Some of the respondents replied that there are people who spit near the gates when chewing paan. During the story telling, we bring subjects from our pasts, presents and evolve it for a future story (McMahon and Watson 2011). So all these information gathered and imagined visualizations that I have developed into a cartoon and recreated my interpretation into a 3D environment.

**Figure 11.** *Chase-O-Rama (2011)*



For effective storytelling, one of the most crucial elements is the human face the character's facial expression conveys direct human emotion when infusing the experiences (Flaherty 2009). Figure 11 shows that the facial and body gestures of a man spitting paan on the floor inside the train using an animation approach. This is connected with another character that has entered the train and accidentally stepped on the spit. As a result, he slipped and fell as shown in Figure 12. The narration is driven by adding these special elements of surprises from our daily life experiences into a scene.

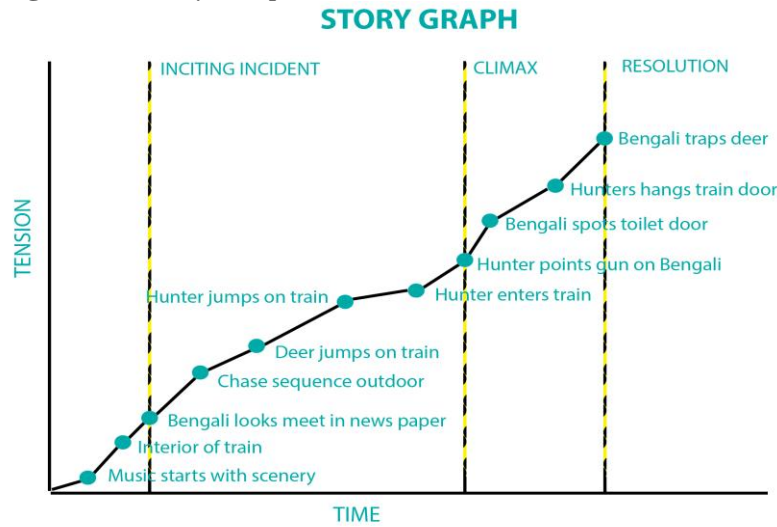
Throughout the interview session, I got to understand the experiences of the interviewees and found connection points for the scenes in the narrations.

**Figure 12.** *Chase-O-Rama (2011)*

### Composition in Narrative Structure

During the final phase, I organized and linked the scenes to form a composition. I chose the incidents from others and my own experiences and placed it in the story. Based on all the data collected during the interview and the visual design analysis, I have converted it into a story graph (Figure 13). The story graph shows that time in the X-axis and tension in Y-axis. This is to analyze the intensity of the narrative structure before bringing it into an animation process. As order is one of the significant features of unfolding a story. In conventional stories, order generally resembles time, which is essential to understand connection; Future events get influenced with the past events inside a story (Austin 2011). The idea behind constructing the narrative structure is placing the sequence of events in an order, which relates with the people in the form of fictional story telling. It is a progressive graph where I have placed the different acts in a progressive hierarchy depending on the situations of actions in the structure. If there is an intense action happening in a scene then the story graph will tend to move upwards. If the animation scene is built up in a normal intensity, then the graph will slant more. I have categorized the placement of the events in graph in three divisions that are inciting incident, climax and resolution. Other significant components of successful storytelling is arranging the motion and pacing in a story (Wojtkowski 2013). It can form the events by adding them in a patterned structure for the scene connectivity. The change of actions, story progression, time and environment create curiosity. By adding new stimulating incidents in a film the narrative structure will unfold. Subsequently, I used the narrative structure method and made it into a 3D animation film.

**Figure 13. Story Graph**



## Conclusion

Constructing a narrative structure by applying experiences from our lives can bring an emotional and original touch in an animation. It bridges the connection between the audiences and the narration by making people think that these kinds of behaviours and gestures can also be seen in animation. When arranging life experiences for story telling purposes, the experiences from our past and present will give ideas for future story narration. By following a structured process, the narrative structure will be more efficient and more cost effective. After creating a narrative structure, I proceed to convert it into a short animation film. It took approximately three months to produce a story and I manage to keep the cost low. Lastly, this paper hopes to provide the researchers guidance to develop a narrative structure based on the cultural context.

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