

Using Propp's Narrative Methodology to Empower Communities through Animation

Written by: Mona Khorsandi

Introduction

Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools humans use for communication, understanding, and sharing experiences. In today's world, where communication barriers often prevent mutual understanding, animation has emerged as a valuable medium for storytelling. Animation not only bridges communication gaps, but also gives marginalized communities the opportunity to tell their own stories. Whether in the form of social justice, recovery, or personal transformation, animation can help individuals reclaim their voices and share their journeys.

In my Master's thesis, which examined the concept of good and evil as the foundational theme of storytelling in feature-length animated films, focusing on the story of Zakhak as a case study, the results showed that using Vladimir Propp's narrative methodology offers a structured approach that can significantly enhance the effectiveness of animation workshops.

These workshops, particularly those designed for vulnerable groups such as at-risk youth, individuals in recovery from addiction, individuals with autism, and adults with aphasia, can use Propp's framework to organize complex personal stories into narratives of resistance and hope.

Propp's Methodology: A Tool for Structured Storytelling

Vladimir Propp's analysis of folktales allowed him to identify recurring narrative functions and archetypes, which can serve as a framework for designing and developing stories. His methodology is based on the principle that all stories, regardless of culture or context, follow specific structural patterns.

In analyzing the story of Zakhak—an embodiment of evil and tyranny—it is clear that the structure of this narrative follows a classic sequence of heroism, betrayal, and ultimately redemption, themes that deeply resonate with societies seeking recovery through storytelling.

For marginalized groups—such as youth who have been incarcerated by the justice system or individuals recovering from addiction—Propp’s methodology can provide a clear structure for participants to organize their personal stories. These participants, often faced with troubled life experiences, can use this structure to create order and coherence. Additionally, by framing their stories through archetypes of the hero, villain, and helper, participants can externalize their struggles and better understand their personal journeys of transformation.

Animation: A Tool for Narrative Empowerment

Animation, with its visual and accessible nature, serves as a fitting medium for participants to explore these structured narratives.

Moreover, for marginalized communities, animation can have an even greater impact. Workshops integrating animation with Propp’s methodology allow participants to express their complex emotions, struggles, and transformations. For instance:

- **Youth in the Justice System:** Using Propp’s archetypes, youth in the justice system can organize their experiences as personal transformation stories, shifting the focus from crime and punishment to growth and redemption. This approach enables them to reframe their role as heroes overcoming challenges. Additionally, using this framework can enhance empathy and deeper understanding among mentors and those involved in the rehabilitation process. By reconstructing their personal stories, youth can see themselves not only as individuals who have corrected past mistakes but as role models for others seeking change. This shift in perspective can motivate them to create a more positive and fulfilling future for themselves.
- **Addiction Recovery:** In the process of recovery from addiction, animation provides a way to process the stages of addiction as a narrative, where the individual is a hero who defeats personal demons (villains) with the help of supportive characters (helpers). This approach helps individuals view the dark and difficult stages of their life as part of a personal journey toward redemption. By depicting successes and failures through story, individuals can see their recovery path as attainable, especially when facing social and emotional challenges.
- **Autism:** For individuals with autism, animation offers a means for non-verbal storytelling, where visual metaphors can convey complex emotions and experiences, helping to overcome communication barriers. This method allows individuals to express their inner

world in a tangible and understandable way for others without the need for words. Furthermore, animation acts as a tool to increase self-awareness and confidence, as individuals can showcase their unique abilities through visual stories and facilitate social connections.

- **Adults with Aphasia:** For adults with aphasia, whose communication abilities are affected, animation can be a useful tool for rebuilding communication skills. In this process, using visual metaphors and symbols helps individuals express complex emotions and thoughts despite linguistic limitations. This method allows them to gradually improve their communication with others through narrative visualizations and gain a sense of independence and empowerment.

Storytelling for Social Change

In addition to personal empowerment, storytelling through animation has the potential to raise awareness and drive social change. Narratives created by marginalized groups can serve as tools for advocacy, highlighting the experiences and struggles they face. These stories can challenge misconceptions and stereotypes within society and give audiences a closer look at the world of marginalized individuals. In this way, animation not only provides an opportunity for individual expression but also contributes to broader social changes that ultimately enhance empathy and participation in society.

By incorporating Propp's methodology in these workshops, participants can not only organize their personal stories but also create narratives that address universal themes of justice, identity, and self-reliance. The powerful and visual nature of animation reinforces these messages and allows them to connect with a wider audience. These connections can serve as a catalyst for positive social change and create spaces for dialogue on social and cultural issues. Additionally, by using animation, participants can transform their personal experiences into a shared, global language that is not only understandable and impactful for themselves but also for a larger community.

Conclusion

Animation is more than just a creative medium—it is a tool for empowerment, healing, and social support. Using Propp’s narrative methodology, animation workshops provide a structured way for marginalized communities to create, process, and share their stories. This process not only strengthens personal identity and individual abilities but also fosters a space for social rebuilding and human connection.

By combining the power of storytelling with the transformative potential of animation, we can inspire a more empathetic and inclusive world. Through these creative collaborations, we can effectively address the challenges and issues faced by vulnerable communities and pave the way for positive social change.