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**Narration and Dramaturgy in Emergency Situations**

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In this article, the authors propose that in order to learn how to act effectively within, and after, dynamic situations (including distressing or traumatic situations), one can profitably receive training in narration. Prior to writing this essay together, the authors have worked separately with narrative modes of sense-making and leadership for emergency-situations in business studies (Gibson), medicine (Crea) and military conflict (Chambers). Combining their insights, they have a sharpened focus on the general field of narrative and emergency-training, with a particular emphasis on the military context. Developing ideas from Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘The art of the storyteller’ we observe that stories convey strongly-felt, vicarious experiences such that they are a means of accelerating the acquisition of wisdom and resilience among the community that attends to the stories. We propose a narrative training system that expedites the acquisition and transfer of wisdom and resilience in military contexts and in other emergency situations.

**Keywords:**Narrative — dramaturgy — training — emergency — complexity — leadership — wisdom

‘Narration’ — linked etymologically to the Latin ‘gnaritas’: a technical kind of knowledge.

‘Dramaturgy’ — linked etymologically to the Greek ‘dra’: to do or perform.

**1. Introduction —** **the military example**

Narration is the action of generating and delivering a story or an account of events. As the etymology of ‘narration’ suggests, once you are in receipt of a story, you *know* (to some contestable extent) a gist of the event-world that is the subject of the narration. An ‘event-world’ is dynamic, ever-emerging and complex: it is eventful. And by definition, a story concerning an event-world must wrap around and wrap up the elements and qualities that drive the way that event-world emerges. To have a story is to receive narration about how a particular situation has emerged. Which leads to the proposition that to have a story is to have some knowledge of an emergent situation, no matter how gentle or how urgent the dynamics of the situation might be.

In this essay, we develop this proposition and take seriously the notion that stories can account not only for emergence but also for emergencies. We propose that in order to learn how to act effectively within dynamic situations as they emerge urgently, one might profitably receive training in narration. Prior to writing this essay together, we have worked separately with narrative modes of sense-making and leadership for emergency-situations in business studies (Gibson), medicine (Crea) and military conflict (Chambers). Combining our insights, we have chosen to sharpen our focus on the general field of narrative and emergency training here by concentrating particularly on the military context.

Broadly speaking, stories are used in military contexts to make sense of operations in the past, present and future. As well as being useful for building community and consolidating fellowship, such stories help with the development, storage and transfer of sets of knowledge concerned with particular events and exercises (Paruchabutr 2012). Stories are used to report on the intricacies in military interactions and environments; they are used as a means of communicating what is being done, how the environment is responding and what could potentially happen next, both to the immediate operational team and across the chain of command.

Developing ideas from Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘The art of the storyteller’ we observe that stories convey strongly-felt, vicarious experiences such that they are a means of accelerating the acquisition of *wisdom* among the community that attends to the stories (Benjamin 1969). We define wisdom in Gregory Bateson’s terms as the rich stock of insight that is combined when a reflective and experienced analyst or diviner has been able to accrue ‘knowledge of the larger interactive system — that system which, if disturbed, is likely to generate exponential curves of change’ (Bateson 1972: 439). In complex, ever-changing military contexts, where wisdom and leadership are synergistic and urgently necessary, the efficacy of stories for wisdom acquisition is potentially extremely important. In military training and after-action reviews particularly, stories can be regarded as highly valuable, compressed accounts replete with complex arrays of perspectives and founts of understanding germane to the situations being investigated.

So here is the simple observation that has prompted us to write this essay: although stories are used habitually in military situations, their affordances and value are rarely explicitly analysed or prosyletised by military personnel. For all the narrative activity that occurs daily in military life, for all the benefits of narration as a purveyor of vicarious versions of vital experience and for all the importance of wisdom in military leadership, there is surprisingly little narrative theory or consciously-trained narrative and dramaturgical practice being propounded by the people delivering and receiving the stories. This would appear to be a missed opportunity (Chambers 2012; Kott 2008).

In this essay, we work from the precept that there is real value in bringing together the traditionally separate domains of the humanities and the military to share each other’s understandings about narrative composition and reception, dramatic performance, and the necessity of routinely accounting for high-stakes experiences and their aftermaths. For military agents, the composition, performance and critical witnessing of stories combine in a multi-disciplinary skill set that not only enhances real-time sense-making but also enriches peoples’ reflective understanding of experiences after events have played out. Thus stories are vital not only for sense-making and decision-making throughout a military situation; they are also useful in promoting agency over the legacies that persist once the action in that situation appears to be finished. These ‘legacy’ circumstances range from after-action reviews through to the challenging processes of living with personal trauma.

While acknowledging how much important work looms in the field of narrative practice for trauma-resilience, in order to grasp some first principles of military narratology before even considering how to apply those principles to the delicacies of post-trauma-resilience, we will begin by concentrating on how sense-making and decision-making in military training procedures (‘pre-trauma’) can be informed by narrative and dramaturgical expertise. We treat the communal process of composing, performing and witnessing stories in training regimes as a low-tech ‘simulation system’ which offers great cost-efficiency and knowledge-yield in military contexts. We conclude by outlining a practicable military story-system and an operational dramaturgy that entwines composition, performance and witnessing to enhance learning and to generate communicable knowledge and diagnostic perspicacity about complex military experiences (Chambers 2012).

**2. Key concepts of narration and dramaturgy in military training**

Story-composition, story-performance and story-witnessing are low-tech, low-cost modes of shared simulation that synthesise, store and communicate vicarious experiences in communal settings. When expertly blended within a corps setting, they can deepen soldiers’ understanding of the complex dynamics that are always playing out in conflict scenarios. This enhanced understanding can lead to framing more useful military objectives, to more decisive decision-making and to more visionary approaches to future options as commanders respond to complex warfighting. Adeptness with story-composition, story-performance and story-witnessing can give trainers and trainees better briefing and debriefing abilities in training and in real-time battle situations. This story-adeptness can also lead to more sensitive and effective methods for assessing and managing risk in emergency circumstances — not only in the military — thereby contributing to better leadership and urgent well-informed action in crises (Kott 2008; Endsley & Garland 2001).

Because stories are *accounts of experience* — be that experience actual in the past or present, or fictional or speculative in some imagined past, present or prospective future — causes and effects encountered within experiences can be modelled and examined with stories. And because emotional impacts of performing and witnessing are inherent to a narrated experience, story-witnesses can feel as though they are engaged (albeit vicariously or empathetically) in the represented experience. Thus the call-and-response aspect of a story-experience is a mode of simulation in which the experience can be proposed, undergone and reviewed by an involved group of participants. The experience may be vicarious, but it can still be informatively felt and realised in the imaginations and the sensoria of those involved (Colombetti 2009; Aristotle 1997).

Stories operate within a three-part system: (1) composition, (2) performance (or dramaturgy), and (3) witnessing. These modes are intertwined. Story-*composition* is the work of an author; it usually occurs ‘in the composer’s head’. Story-*performance* is the process of delivering a tale, the process of *offering an account*; it is an account that occurs in time and space via the narrator’s performative exertions and it presumes, indeed *requires*, the attendance of witnesses. Our description of narrative as an *account* emphasises the *use-value* of story composition and story-performance. An account delivers measured information, organising, storing and communicating data, concepts and feelings about how events play out as cause and effect through time in space. When producing an account, a story-composer can sum up the current status and value or potency of a situation while also identifying the ‘drivers’ of that situation so that its constitutive details — the active imperatives and the mood of the ongoing occurrence — can be summed up and communicated.

Finally, to round out the definitions of the three-part system, story-*witnessing* is best understood as the experience of attending to, analysing and evaluating the information-load and emotional impact of a performed story. By witnessing a story, the audience can acquire a *situation awareness* through assaying the many purported factors — the relevant and irrelevant information as well as the compelling moods or emotions — that can give form to an evolving situation (Endsley & Garland 2001; Klein 2009). Such a witnessing-assay involves the story-performers and the witnesses in a comprehensive summation of the situation, helping them *grasp* the situation with a felt awareness as well as a cerebral apprehension.

Thus story-composers and story-performers can take and give account of the reasons and passions that drive the actions and reactions of individuals, communities, environmental systems and even entire societies. As witnesses encounter and remember the sundry stories proffered by the composers/performers who are accounting for an emerging circumstance, a narrative mesh can be gathered. This mesh of stories can account for ‘what is going on’ within the complex circumstance, braiding an array of narratives delivered from various vantage-points in space and time within the complex situation. Thus an assemblage or corps of narrators can provide a wholistic and shifting configuration of accountable information and emotional charge concerned with how the complex system is tending (Cilliers 1998).

Because stories can work inspectively (attentive to the present), retrospectively (attentive to the past) and prospectively (attentive to the future), they can also serve observation, memory and imagination while addressing and activating emotions, past, present and future*.* Therefore the *emotions* or *structures of feeling* (Williams 1977: 128) that influence the human factors in any situation can be evoked, examined and activated with story-composition, story-performance and story-witnessing (Benjamin 1969; Cassirer 1956: 96; Klein 2009; Merleau-Ponty 1994; Ricoeur 1984: 88). Stories expedite *phatic* as well as semantic comprehension and communication, and this is of great importance in military contexts, since the human factors of emotional motivation and reactivity have never been eliminated from military situations. Story-performance and story-witnessing can help personnel develop techniques to better register and mobilise the phatic aspects of human behaviour, including those aspects that consolidate fellowship and team-coordination as well as individual composure and agency in the military.

This topic of *the emotions and the moods* that suffuse story-performance and story-witnessing is important because feelings always influence the dynamics of any situation where people engage urgently with each other in real time and space. Actions are driven as much by emotions as by reasons; and story-performance and story-witnessing work together at a phatic level — giving pattern and impulsion to emotions as well as to information — at least as much as they work together at a semantic level. Indeed, it is arguable that for comprehensive situation awareness involving human agents, one must first understand how emotions are agitating the people (or characters) within a scene if one wants to grasp the real value of the information and the potentialities poised therein (Colombetti 2009; Hogan 2011). In other words, stories grant access to many of the ‘human factors’ that influence how events play out in the real world of human agency; and they can activate, direct and to some extent *re-*direct those human factors.

By extension, stories can help us understand the drivers galvanising a situation, whether environmental, animal, rational, emotional, mathematical and coincidental as well as psychologically and sociologically human. A situation is usually a peculiar mesh of all the above, emerging continuously in space and time. Studying narration can help us grasp such continuous complexity. The philosopher Paul Cilliers has explained that complexity ‘cannot be reduced to simple, coherent and universally valid discourses’ (1998: 130). Neither stable nor objective, complexity emerges and evolves systematically but always on an edge of chaos. To begin understanding a complex system, Cilliers observes, one must first develop ways to get inside it, thereby diminishing one’s distance from it; then one must repeat the system over and over by composing an account of what appears to be going on within it as it eventuates; one must take note of the situation’s cardinal qualities, as they are discernible from the vantage-point in space and time that one presently occupies within the events, paradoxically acknowledging that the system has always altered already and cannot be repeated; and one also must attend to other accounts from other agents elsewhere inside the complex system, hearing how the system seems to be tending from their specific vantage-points. And then, at a ‘meta-level’, one must make a mesh of all these stories and accept that, with this mesh, one has not captured the situation. Rather, one has merely filtered it and collected a residue of some of the ‘telling’ factors and tendencies. One cannot freeze and model the situation, but one can generate a polyvalent account of how the system has been tending. Story-performance and story-witnessing comprise the best method we have for understanding how a complex situation effloresces (Cilliers 1998: 130–35).

Cilliers’ description encapsulates the essence of what many commanders wrestle with in the battle space; similarly, a lead surgeon in an emergency operating-theatre; a business leader in a phase of jeopardy or sudden opportunity; or even a midfielder ‘on the ball’ in a football match. The mesh of stories from many perspectives within the changeful space and time of the situation can be synthesised to afford some comprehension in the receiver of the stories, comprehension that is incomplete and ever-evolving but is the best accessible vantage on the system’s tendencies within all the flux and unpredictability.

**3. Outlining a practical system for understanding and mobilising the semantic and phatic force of stories**

Stories are a means not only of witnessing present experiences, in an inspective manner, but also of remembering and passing on accounts of particular events, in a retrospective manner, after they have occurred. They can offer versions of what might happen (and why, how, when and to whom such happenings can occur) in a prospective manner in future eventualities. Drawing on Cilliers’ work, we observe that stories are a means of engaging with, analysing, understanding and reacting to changeful circumstances that are driven by complex arrays of influences while present time rolls backward into the past and forward into the immediate future. The crucial point is that such ‘rolling’ can be influenced by human agency. It can be influenced by a person’s ability not only to observe, analyse and remember but also to intervene in the eventuality. In other words, narratively-informed *techniques* can be applied to complex situations, both for understanding the situations and to influence how they evolve.

Turning our attention to such narratological *techniques* now, we observe that good story-composers and story-performers can capture and activate the key *drivers* of a situation, thereby concentrating the witnesses’ attention on the vital factors that are at play in an ‘emergency’, literally in a complex situation as it is emerging dynamically and urgently. This ability to pinpoint the drivers and to relate them to the participants in a scene requires narratological and dramaturgical expertise. In other words, manipulating the drivers requires high-level technique both in the composition of a story and in the dramatic performance or delivery of that story in real, urgent time.

Crucially, as a means of enhancing one’s imagination and understanding of complex situations, effective story-*witnessing* is as vital as composition and performance: well-trained witnesses can discern the meanings and the patterns of emotions that are being conveyed in the tale. Well-trained witnessing facilitates the *call-and-response* drama within the community involved in the gestalt of the narration in such a way that the ‘big brain’ (more than the sum of the participant parts) of the engaged community can contribute to the knowledge that is being captured and activated in the story. In this sense, well-trained story-composing, story-performing and story-witnessing can combine to inform and galvanise a community or corps (in the military context, for example) that is trying to find its way through an emerging situation.

In military contexts, commanders need to be trained to become excellent witnesses, as do the corps members who are responding to the commander’s calls. A good witness — deploying expertise and technique synergistic to the abilities of the story-performer — ‘calls to account’ and responds to the fundamental elements of the tale. Think of the battle situation. Think of how often a commander needs story-witnessing expertise in order to divine the phatic and semantic intricacies playing out in a situation as it is observed unfolding, and as multiple reports arrive from all over the field. The commander must compose a mesh of all the accounts being received and then propose a next-moment for the story. Think also of how the corps members respond at a phatic as well as at an informatic or ‘ordered’ level to the assertions being made by the commanders within the dynamics of the battle situation. The complexity arises from simultaneous improvising by several correspondents or participants: after all, the commander’s story is composed of all the respondents’ stories playing out as the situation emerges.

Pondering so much complexity, we confront a simple but crucial question: how much *formal training* in story-composition, story-performance and story-witnessing do commanders and corps-members receive? And how much do they all need it? (We speak here of the military situation; but the question applies to all emergency domains, such as medicine, civic security, aspects of business and corporate leadership, even sports events.)

Surveying contemporary military culture in Australia, we note that there is a dearth of narratological theorisation and training. And we contend that this dearth is a liability and that opportunities are being missed for high-yield and low-cost training (Chambers 2012). Therefore, advocating the need for training to develop story-expertise in all ranks, from massed troops through to high-level commanders, we propose a three-part approach to systematic narrative training:

1. Training to develop techniques for the story-composer;
2. Training to develop techniques for the story-performer; and
3. Training to develop techniques for the story-witness or interpreter.

Once each set of techniques has been learned, we contend, working to combine the three sets into a real-time, improvisatory interpretive methodology is highly desirable and efficacious for sense-making and decision-making.

**3 a. Techniques for the Story-Composer**

**3 a (i) The narrative drivers to be manipulated by the story-composer**

When creating a narrative, a story-composer can manipulate the following array of ‘drivers’ that give shape and momentum to a tale:

SETTING — where in space and time is the story occurring? Consider what happens when the story-composer manipulates this driver.

CHARACTERS — who are the agents contending for influence, survival, satisfaction et cetera within the story? Characters are usually people, but they can be animals, places, nations, communities, anything with a ‘personality’ and a compelling set of motivations that interact with the motivations of other characters. Consider what happens when the story-composer manipulates this driver.

PLOT & INTRIGUE — what are the chains of events and the compelling mysteries that urge the characters and the audience to stay engaged with the unfolding of the story? Consider what happens when the story-composer manipulates this driver.

MOOD — in the setting and among the characters and the audience, what are the large, defining feelings or ‘emotional climate’ suffusing the story? Consider what happens when the story-composer manipulates this driver.

THEME or MORAL or MISSION — What is the story *really* about? What is the message, what are the crucial things to be learned, the conveyed experience that alters the way the audience member might think and feel about a particular issue? What are the values or morals or beliefs that are emphasised in the delivery of the story? Consider what happens when the story-composer manipulates this driver.

GENRE — Is the story offered in such a way that it is part of a larger, established genre, such as a western, a noir-crime story, a romance, an espionage-thriller, a survivor-testimony? Aspects of the genre get imposed ‘from outside the tale’ or from the top-down, at the same time as the story-composer/performer generates interest and intrigue by offering fresh and distinctive variations on the generic conventions. This interplay between the generic conventions and the narrator’s innovations usually intensifies the intrigue and enhances the witness’s engagement with the tale. Consider what happens when the story-composer manipulates this driver.

VIEWPOINT — Each moment in a story is told from a specific viewpoint in space and time. A shift in viewpoint can tell a very different story. Each situation contains multiple stories. Consider what happens when the story-composer manipulates this driver.

With confidence and mastery over the drivers, one has the means to compose (and then perform) a story with intensified nuance and intricacy, to take charge of the story, to have agency with it, and to observe the myriad ways a particular complex system can alter as specific changes press through it. (In these regards, the benefits that can arise from learning narrative techniques in some post-traumatic circumstances are compelling, contingent on the particulars of each case, of course.) Most important to understand is the fact that one does not have to utilise every single driver. Rather, one can highlight some and downplay or even ignore others. Indeed, one can compose and perform a tale with a configuration of drivers and then recalibrate the tale by changing the relative emphasis among the drivers, like moving sliders on a mixing desk in a sound studio. In the recalibration, one *considers how the story changes*, how the new version highlights new factors, other urgencies or fresh possibilities and jeopardies within the situation. Thus as one adjusts the drivers again and again, iteration after iteration, one perceives a mesh of several versions of the system playing out, and one can grasp an enhanced situation awareness.

**3 a (ii) The narrative diagnostics available to the story-composer**

Once a story-composer has assembled a story ‘in the head’, and perhaps written down its key points, he or she can run the following ‘narrative diagnostics’ over the story, to see if the diagnostics can cause improvements to the story. Most trained story-composers call these diagnostics ‘the whowhatwhenwherewhy’ although they can be traced back to Aristotle and the debates around the ‘seven circumstances’ (Sloane 2010). As one composes or gets ready to perform a story, one asks:

*who* is performing the tale for *whom*, and *who* are the main characters;

*what* do the characters want or need and *what* is impeding as well as aiding the characters’ satisfaction;

*what* is the story really concerned with;

*what* information and *what* emotions are being conveyed;

*when* do the main events occur and *when* do they exert influence or receive impact;

*where* do the main events occurs and *wher*e are the main characters located;

*why* does this story matter;

and *why* is the narrator offering the audience these particular snippets of information *right now*?

**3 b (i)** **Dramaturgical drivers available to the story-performer**

In offering a narrative once it has been composed, a story-*performer* can be attentive to the following dramaturgical drivers that can give force to the *performance*, shaping how the tale gets delivered and how it impacts on the witness:

TONE & STYLE — what is the main emotion or ‘signal’ that is being transmitted by the story-performer to the audience? Is the tone earnest, candid, ironic, coy, flippant? Consider what happens when the story-performer manipulates this driver by adopting one tone and then shifting to another tone – a joke to start, an earnest warning to finish, for example.

COMPORTMENT — how does the story-performer manage and exploit his or her physical presence, voice, rhythm and direct or indirect engagement with audience-members? A story-performer needs good self-knowledge: what are the performer’s strong qualities or resources? For example, an appealing voice, a good sense of rhythm, elegance of movement. And equally important, what aspects are less strong. The performance must be shaped to the performer’s resources.

CALL & RESPONSE — how does the story-performer encourage input or interaction from the audience-members; how to get them involved, how to get them ‘owning’ the progress of the story; how to encourage the audience-members to offer crucial details of the story if the performer is omitting such details?

GOALS & MOTIVATIONS — what is the performer trying to do to the audience at each particular moment: is the performer manipulating the tension by withholding information; or getting ready to reward the audience-members for their attentiveness with a payoff of information; or activating their emotions; or activating their intellect and their analytical faculties? What is the underlying motivation for acting in a particular way?

ROLE — the performer must be aware that the audience will look upon him or her as a character in a drama; so, what is the role that the performer wants to work with; is the performer a bold innovator; or the safe and trustworthy boss; or the forensic investigator? Performers should be aware that they can switch roles (as well as tone and comportment) throughout the performance, so long as they take care to intrigue and engage rather than confuse and alienate the audience.

PROPS — the performer may find it helpful to utilise additional props and objects in order to enact their story.

**3 b (ii) Rehearsal techniques available to the story-performer**

Once the performer has a good grasp of how they would like to compose and perform the story, they should try this basic exercise which will help them understand how any general story can take on specific variations, depending on contexts:

compose and perform the story as if delivering it to people who must carry out your orders (i.e. people of lower authority);

then deliver the same general story as if for television and radio reporters and audiences;

then deliver it as if for a town-hall meeting of concerned civilians;

then again for people of higher authority (e.g. one’s commanding officers in the military; or one’s board of governors in a business setting).

This exercise helps performers grasp the fascinating variability of information, rhythm, emotion, tone and general dramaturgical technique that can be brought to the changeable delivery of any story at any particular time in any place.

**3 c  Techniques for the story-*receiver* or *witness* for enhancing awareness of information, emotions and modes of persuasion in a performed story**

If one learns to witness well, one will harvest crucial information (phatic and semantic) from the narrative transactions that have occurred between the story-witness and the story-composer/story-performer.

Developing a capacity to witness accurately, drawing on one’s emotional and intuitive intelligence to make sense of multiple story inputs, remains a valuable skill for any commander. By witnessing how the story-composer has structured the story and by witnessing how the story-performer has delivered the story, one can discern not only what the story-composer/performer knows and consciously strives to convey, but also what the composer/performer is omitting or is uncertain or anxious about. The witness can sense what is ‘at stake’ for the composer/performer in the narrative situation: what does the composer/performer want, and what is impeding them from getting what they want?

The witness might also discern the *tacit* knowledge of the composer/performer — the aspects of an experience that the composer/performer knows in a deep or implicit or embodied way but does not usually put into words or make explicit. (This is not only ‘body language’; it can also be know-how or resistance or reluctance that is unspoken but influential in the performer’s behaviour or decision-making. All these unspoken things can be ‘telling’.) The witness should be alert to all the patterns of information in the composed and performed story – be those patterns tacit or explicit, linguistic or gestural or embodied. The witness should also be attentive to the emotional flow or patterning in the tale, because the emotions often provide the first insights into the tacit knowledge, and into the ambiguities and tensions and contradictions — the phatic human factors — that might be driving a situation.

By being attentive to the narrative and dramaturgical drivers listed above, the witness can analyse what is being heard and seen. The witness can ask: what drivers is the story-performer manipulating? What is motivating the story-performer? What is being revealed and what is being concealed? The witness should be aware of how the story composer/performer is manipulating (or failing to manipulate) the witness’s emotions, curiosity and yearning for clarity. It is also worth remembering that a story poorly delivered, if diagnosed well, is often as informative or ‘telling’ as a story well composed and performed.

The witness should strive for self-knowledge, asking ‘how is the story-performer “pushing buttons” and manipulating my emotions as well as my intellect throughout the story?’

The witness should also learn how to diagnose the story and the performance with the ‘whowhatwhenwherewhy’ filter. Ask: who is the narrator of this story and who are the main characters; what relationships prevail between the narrator-character and the other characters in the tale; what do the characters want or need, particularly the main character or protagonist; what is the story really concerned with; what information is being conveyed and what emotions; when do the main events occur and when do they exert influence on the characters, or when do the characters ‘push back’ and exert impact on the forces in the environment; where do the main events occur and where are the main characters located; why does this story matter and why is the narrator telling me these particular snippets of information *right now*?

**4. Showrunning —​ marshalling narrative techniques of composition within communal contexts**

An effective navigator of emergent situations must become adept in all three technical areas of story composition, story-performance and story-witnessing. What would best practice in such three-part technique look like? Are there exemplary regimes or leadership systems already operating in other contexts, proven regimes that might be transposed to training regimens for emergency situations generally and to military contexts particularly?

One of the most notable developments in international mass media over the past two decades has been the blooming of critically and popularly acclaimed ‘long-form’ television series, particularly in the USA. Stellar examples include *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, *Breaking Bad* and *Justified*. Each of these programs is the dramatisation of an intensified, idiosyncratic world (the drug economy of Baltimore; the New Jersey Mafia; frontier-town America; manic narcotic entrepreneurialism in Albuquerque; law and disorder in Harlan County Kentucky) wherein a cast of characters, a consistent setting, an abiding set of intrigues and a retinue of themes are iterated and reiterated in episode after episode of innovative storytelling. For each episode that appears weekly, the storyline has been generated by a team of writers (from three to twelve writers per program) who have brainstormed literally hundreds of different thematic options, plot intrigues, character drives and lines of action and reaction. It is the job of this roomful of writers to spawn a welter of story-options. The writers configure, from the ground up, the full profusion of dynamics in the story-world — all its tendencies for evolution and entropy, all its complexities rising up as a profusion of possible storylines. Especially early in the development of the series, the writers are profligate, elemental or ‘wild’ story-composers.

Also in the writers’ room is the show-runner. (The most celebrated are David Chase of *The Sopranos*, Vince Gilligan of *Breaking Bad,* David Simon of *The Wire*, Tina Fey of *30 Rock,* and Graham Yost of *Justified.)* The show-runner’s job is to provide steerage, from the top down, to the plenitude of ideas and prognostications rising up from the writers. Checking always for plausibility as well as for thrilling story-twists and surprises, the show-runner must attend to the particular drives of the characters and the special qualities of the setting while insisting on the maintenance of consistent plotting with reference to what has already occurred in the intensified story-world throughout the series. (As *Boardwalk Empire*’s show-runner Terence Winter declares, ‘There’s a certain world depicted … and it should look like the same place every week’ [Kallas 2014: 28].)

In addition to concentrating on the processes of story-composition, the show-runner must also be attentive to the story-performance, insofar as it his or her responsibility to brief the director and run quality control on the impact of the acting, shooting and editing that constitute the story that gets witnessed, ultimately, by the mass audience. In the interplay between the from-the-ground-up fecundity of the writers’ room and the judicious creativity of the show-runner, a startling, inventive story-world is generated. Some show-runners say the room is the ‘id’ and the runner is the ‘super-ego’.

In the television industry it is widely agreed that this system generates much greater insight and imagination than would ever be possible with one writer toiling alone in a room and one director picking up the fully-polished script at the start of the month. In industry parlance, the show-running/team-writing method engages ‘the big brain’ of the team plus the show-runner in a dynamic that combines story-composition, story-performance and story-witnessing to canvass every option and give rise to the best line of eventualities from all the tendencies and possibilities inherent to the story-world (or complex system).

This same approach can be productively applied to story-composition, story-performance and story-witnessing in the military, particularly in training regimes; and also in situations such as group-work for campaign design and operational planning purposes. Applying these ideas in real-world training circumstances, we have used the show-running procedures in exercises and consultancy reports with the Australian Defence services over the past few years (Crea, Gibson & Fidock 2017).

Reporting on Crea and Gibson’s experience of delivering narrative and dramaturgical expertise to the military training situation, we have found that the equivalent of the writers’ room is an assemblage of all the trainees and simulation-exercise participants; the equivalent of the show-runner is the simulations exercise leader or Unit Commander. This same dynamic applies in everyday military work: ‘the room’ is the corps of troops who provide story-composition or interpretive options ‘from the field’ and/or from lived experience informing factual reporting or speculative fabulation, while the Simulation Leader or the Unit Commander selects preferences from and refines those proffered options and interpretations while guiding the right people in the performance of the chosen narratives until the entire ‘ensemble’ arrives at a point where they can analyse how the performance has been usefully witnessed and appreciated. It is an approach predicated on agility and flexibility: both the real-life Unit Commander and the show-runner are required to remain responsive to feedback from the environment and always alert to potential new story developments, while keeping an eye on the overarching narrative trajectory that always appears to be unfurling in real time to give shape to the situation or ‘story-world’.

**5. Conclusion**

Stories are used every day at every level of every society or organisation. They are used by people attempting to trace causes, to propose, to warn, to remember, to take stock, to wonder or to conjure and consider possibilities, to make plans or devise strategies. Skilled story-composers and story-performers take account of the drivers in a scene — be those drivers characters, desires, moods, themes, oratorical tone, or environmental forces. Good story-composition, especially composition generated communally (in a writers-room style) and moderated with expert steerage (as by a show-runner or a simulations director or a monitoring commander) is therefore morphological: it is concerned with how form prevails or changes, in matter and moments. And because there can be multiple narrators for any one tale, an expert story-performance can offer a particular viewpoint from within the several vantage-points and belief systems comprising a situation. Then, of course, once a story has been composed and delivered in relation to a situation, that tale needs to be reiterated, which is to say it should be re-composed and re-performed so that a profusion of vantages in space and time is given an airing, and so that the story-witnesses can accumulate the mesh of several stories that capture some of the tendencies and the multivalency within the complex, emergent scene that is being investigated. Thus the three-part system of story-composition, story-performance and story-witnessing bears directly on questions of collectivity and connectedness within complex-dynamic, multi-factorial situations.

Stories allow the composers, performers and witnesses to ask the crucial questions about all the factors that give form and cause dynamic emergence to a situation; to ask and answer questions about the ‘who, what, when where, why’ that are propelling a situation.

The ‘when’ is especially crucial, for narration operates in three time scales, sometimes all at once: namely, the retrospective scope of memory plus the inspective scope of present observation plus the prospective scope of speculation, planning and strategising. A story can be descriptive, but it can also be speculative. Therefore, stories can be applied in real-world circumstances, for example in businesses and cultural organisations, in emergency situations, or in team sports to gain greater understanding how information and emotions assemble and flow whenever human beings need to:

a) compose, store, share and debate renditions of the past;

b) produce rapidly-updating, profusely-disseminated and widely-debated accounts of the present; and

c) speculate and communicate about possibilities for the future.

To conclude, we can bring a sharp focus to our considerations of the practical value of story-composing, story-performing and story-witnessing by drawing an example from the Defence context. We note Alexander Kott’s (2008) famous list of ‘tasks’ that the commander must undertake in battle:

diagnosing,  
planning,  
deciding,  
delegating,  
synchronising,  
communicating  
and motivating.

We note how Kott’s factors are strikingly similar to the roles of the improvising show-runner. And we note how applicable all this is also to the medical practitioner (particularly but not only in emergency situations), to the business executive, to the sporting coach or performer: indeed to anyone who is obliged to negotiate complexity on a daily basis.

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