

Learning by Seeing: Visualization-supported Re-enactment and Understanding of Story Generation

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Abstract

The Narrative Nubs research project re-implements existing story generators as compact, reusable miniatures, but many systems remain difficult to compare and understand from code and text alone for a broader audience. This position paper argues for a visualization layer that makes both generators and generated narratives perceptible visually. I propose (1) a glyph-based notation that summarizes a generator's essential design choices in a comparable visual form, (2) interactive process visualizations that reveal intermediate states, rule activations, and decision paths during generation, and (3) corpus-wide visual comparisons of outputs across generators. I discuss design requirements for visualizations in line with the project's nub philosophy: minimal, modular, and remixable. The goal is not decoration but rather legibility, enabling users to surface assumptions, trace story generation mechanics, and situate systems within their cultural and historical contexts.

Keywords

Story Generation, Miniatures, Computational Narrative Systems, Visualization, Visual Analysis

1. Introduction

There is a long-standing fascination with machines that write stories: not because they merely produce text, but because they seem capable of generating immersive narratives, recognizable characters, and even emotions without a human author [1]. These autonomous story generators are documented in publications, surveys [2, 3, 4, 5], and books [1, 6], but some survive only in screenshots or in the texts they emit [7].

The *Narrative Nubs* [8] project transforms existing story generators into Python 3 abstracted “nubs,” to reveal their inner workings, surface assumptions, and build a repository for researchers, educators, and artists (see Subsection 1.1). Yet even reimplemented systems can remain black boxes: we can run them and read their outputs, while the decisions and constraints that shape those outputs stay buried in code and terminology.

In this position paper, I argue that graphical user interfaces (GUI) and visualization frameworks can make these systems inspectable while keeping their wonder. Building on *Narrative Nubs* as an experimental code repository, I propose a visual interface that makes systems and parameters playfully accessible while supporting insight into generation processes and outputs through visualization. To serve different user groups, I envision a shared visualization framework with role-specific views: an analytical interface for research, a scaffolded interface for education, and a remix-oriented interface for artistic exploration. Thus, along this new spin-off project *Visual Narrative Nubs*, I want to approach the following research questions:

(1) *How can visualization-supported GUIs contribute to the accessibility of the code-based story generator repository?* More specifically: How can a role-specific GUIs invite researchers, students, and artists to study and modify the underlying code of a nub?

(2) *How can a domain-specific visualization-based framework support the understanding and communication of the inner workings of story generators across different user groups?* More specifically: How can different views help researchers, students, and artists better understand the workings of a nub?

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1.1. Narrative Nubs

Narrative Nubs is an ongoing research project focused on building small, self-contained “nubs” by reimplementing simplified versions of existing story generation systems. These “miniatures” keep the essential ideas while remaining compact and easy to work with [9]. We develop them in Python 3 following consistent coding styles so that each component is modular, reusable, and accessible. A key goal is to make often overlooked systems, which are frequently described only in academic texts and sometimes known only through their outputs, available for direct exploration. We do this by reenacting historical methods and emphasizing learning-by-doing [10]. The project is designed as a platform for research, teaching, and artistic work, encouraging users to remix, combine, and modify code and components. Through these nubs, we aim to reveal not just the technical mechanisms of story generators but also the assumptions of their creators and elements of the cultural and historical contexts in which they were produced. Four nubs are already reimplemented: GESTER [11], TAILOR [12], *Story Machine* [13] and *Through the Park* [14] and future candidates will follow soon (see Figure 1).

2. Related Work

This project draws inspiration from techniques for visualizing narrative elements (temporal, spatial, relational) and builds on prior work on story generator representation.

Temporal Representations of narratives often focus on story events and character trajectories over time. Characters are commonly represented as timelines that converge and diverge to indicate interactions or co-occurrences at the scene or event level [15], with an array of techniques, e.g., color-coded curves for nonlinear and parallel narratives [16] or radial layouts [17]. Story arcs have also been visually represented, often with (static) story sequence diagrams [18]. However, representing narrative components is considered an open research topic [19]. Many current systems focus on extracting narrative structure from text [20], but the narrative nubs are aware of their own structures, which shifts the near-term focus toward visualization design. Higher-level narrative progression and inner characteristics of plots are also arc-like depicted “visuospatial analogies” [21, 22], showing, e.g., tension in the generative writing process of *MEXICA* via tensional charts [23], or sentiment [24]. But even with these techniques, comprehensive computational evaluation of narrative quality remains an open problem [25] and pure timeline views can struggle with parallel, branching, and convergent story paths.

Spatial Representations lay out narrative elements in a plane to support overview and navigation through narrative graphs [26] or geospatial mapping of story events [27].

Relational Representations emphasize connections between entities, often as node-link diagrams [28]. Causality can be depicted in flow diagrams [29] and semantic networks of stories are frequently represented as graphs [30] which naturally connects to network analysis and established visualization techniques [31]. However, graph-based approaches can face scalability issues and can make it difficult to maintain temporal and causal order when using automatic layout algorithms.

Hybrid Representations juxtapose multiple visualizations to highlight tensions in data stories [32] or via blending of timelines and graphs to support narrative exploration [33], or temporal views with spatial mapping in 2D [34] and 3D [35]. Much recent work in this space focuses on text-to-image generation as part of narrative presentation [36, 37], using “visual scene graphs” based on the stories [38], rather than data visualizations of narratives per se.

Story Generation Representations step away from the multi-modal representation of narrative events via e.g., animated objects [39] and focus instead on the inner workings of story generators, often relying on flow-chart style diagrams [40]. Comparable visualizations of “machine internals” exist outside narrative, such as mapping DJ desk settings to 3D objects to expose how electronic music is created [41]. For branching generation, (nonlinear) story graphs can be used to represent internal decision structure [42] or provide explicit visualizations for the internal reasoning of computational narrative systems [43]. Interactive visual interfaces allow direct access to the story generation via systems’ vocabulary and rule choices in a text field [44] or drawing story characters’ *fortune* via a line which generates stories via LLMs [45]. Such current approaches with LLMs are popular, but neglect often non-neural techniques

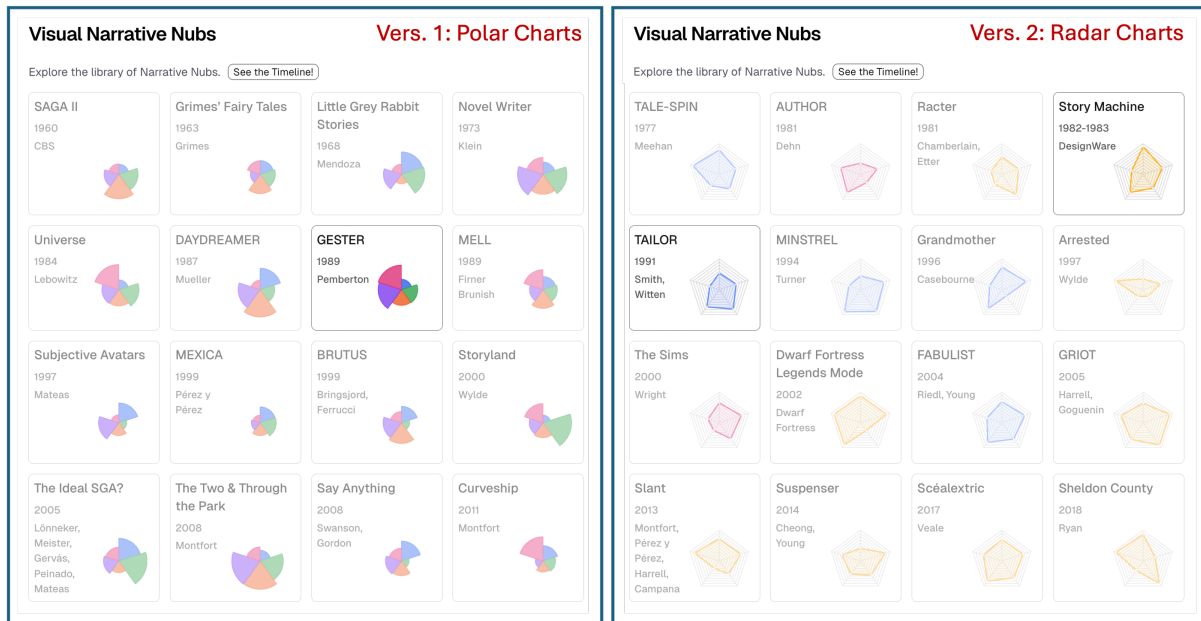


Figure 1: Grid-view homepage of Visual Narrative Nubs, envisioning two examples of *small multiples* to visually compare nubs. Left: polar charts. Right: radar charts with color encoding categories of story generators [5]. The visualized values are for now randomized. The list of systems is matter of current discussions, not all of them will be reimplemented as nubs. GESTER, TAILOR, Story Machine, and Through the Park are already reimplemented.

used in earlier story generators [46]. Further, interpretability and evaluation remain difficult, and suitable explainable AI measurements are still an active research problem [47]. Theoretical frameworks propose ways to categorize story generation systems [48], but such frameworks are not yet widely operationalized as visual or interactive tools. Overall, the literature suggests a gap in techniques for visualizing generator internals in ways that are both explanatory and comparable across systems. For the generated text outputs themselves, digital humanities work offers a broad toolbox for engaging textual visualizations, including part-of-speech and named-entity-recognition-based views, pattern and outlier detection, comparison, and corpus analysis [49], whereby interactivity of digital visualizations support space-complexity trade-offs and navigating between close and distant reading [50].

3. Methodology

Visual Narrative Nubs as a new project will be based on four major pillars which are described in the course of this section and than discussed in Section 4.

3.1. Design Space for Visualization-based Story Generation

Based on the related work and further theoretical literature, a design space for the visualization of story generator systems will be developed in the course of the project. Through this newly composed, overarching design space and metrics, the different narrative approaches will become comparable. Interesting characteristics of story generators for this might be, for example, their main generation approach: rule-based versus statistical methods. Others are the degree of determinism, narrative granularity, state tracking, or input dependence? Further inspectable assumptions of the generators could include narrative arcs, genre, cultural embedding, design of knowledge structures, chain of events, characters, emotions, and story world. With these evaluation measures at hand, a comprehensive visualization-based interface can be developed. Presented in this paper is an early prototype of a GUI with multiple visualizations, to test this approach using the first implemented nubs, mainly TAILOR. This prototype should be understood as a shared foundation and not yet as the final interface for all audiences.

3.2. Museum of Story Generators

In comparison to the code repository of Narrative Nubs, I envision an interactive “museum of reimplemented story generators”, with, for instance, a responsive web-application as exhibition space. There, overview visualizations like a grid-view (see Figure 1) or a timeline detailing the chronology of historical story generators [5] create entry-points for exploration. Drawing from the above-mentioned taxonomy of generator features (e.g., story generation approach/type), a mapping from those features to visual variables will be created. Thus, the story generation systems themselves can be symbolized through *small multiples*, representing their characteristics, so that they are visually comparable next to each other (see Figure 1). In case of the grid-view, these micro-visualizations could be radar or polar charts, creating visual signatures for the individual systems, and acting as comparative artifacts that make differences in architecture, generative strategy, and constraints legible at a glance. This aligns well with the Narrative Nubs’ focus on miniaturization and conceptual distillation.

3.3. Visualization of Story Generation

Zooming from the variety of story generators into one specific, the visualization framework will consist of a set of visualization components which can be used for specific story generators, if applicable, as exemplified in the following with TAILOR. In this planning-based plot generator by Smith and Witten from 1991, anthropomorphic characters interact with each other according to their opposed needs [12].

Each story generator’s GUI allows for immediate try-out sessions of them and their external parameters, where the user can define the input and output of the story generation without the need to set up coding environments (see Figure 2). To allow this, the GUI communicates with the reimplemented nubs via a simple application programming interface (API), which forwards the user input of parameter values (e.g., length of story in number of sentences) from the GUI (see Figure 2A) to the Python nubs in the backend, and answers with the generated story. This story can then be displayed in the GUI and visually augmented, such as colors for named entities and special words (see Figure 2B). This human-in-the-loop approach allows users to directly interact with the input and output. Interactivity of these would allow for direct intervention by users so that the story generation can be adjusted during runtime. To enable even deeper editorial access to the system’s inner workings, an editable text-field could expose the story world, characters, and their motivations, as well as story rules (see Figure 2C). Inspired by Montfort [44] this could be done in a notation which is close to the Python-code definition of the story world, so that the GUI directly invites users to also experiment with the nub’s code base.

While these building blocks are shared, their composition should differ by audience. For researchers, the interface should prioritize comparability, provenance, and inspectability: access to parameters, intermediate states, rule activations, multiple runs, and close links back to the code and documentation. For educators and students, the same backend can be presented through a more scaffolded pedagogical view with curated examples, simplified controls, annotations, and minimized complexity, so that learners can first manipulate inputs and read visual explanations before confronting full code-level detail. For artists, by contrast, the interface can foreground exploratory manipulation, unusual parameter combinations, expressive visual mappings, and remix/export options. In this sense, Visual Narrative Nubs is better conceived as a modular interface with shared components than as one uniform GUI.

Because we already have access to the narrative structures during systems’ plot generation, we can use the information directly in the GUI for visualizing the resulting stories, granting a new perspective of them. Obvious choices for these include: story line charts to characterize the spatial trajectories of characters throughout the chain of events (see Figure 2D), the development of narrative tension [23] (see Figure 2E), or the “fortune” of characters [22] (see Figure 2F). These line chart visualizations have the potential to be overlaid with archetypal plot lines like Freytag’s pyramid [51] to see if these hold.

During story generation, internal processes and developing states could be surfaced and visually depicted. For example, a storyline chart could show not only the generated path but also plausible alternatives by visualizing branches that would emerge if parameters or key decisions were changed, which is relevant for generative and interactive narratives (unlike fixed narratives like novels or films).



Figure 2: Multifaceted visual interface for the TAILOR nub A: Nub parameters to generate stories. B: Generated story output with highlighted entities. C: Editable Python-like notation of characters and story world. D: Story line chart for characters’ trajectories. E: Tensional chart inspired by Pérez y Pérez [23]. F: Fortune chart inspired by Vonnegut [22]. G: 3D Space-time cube visualization for characters’ trajectories. H: Story graph depicting connections between narrative elements. I: Fortune history showing all previous fortune outcomes. Colors represent the characters and locations and emoticons representing attacks and deaths.

Furthermore, the knowledge bases and theme structures of story generators seem to miss interactive and visualization-based depictions [6]. It may even be possible to visualize fine-grained internal steps within a nub, for example by depicting a random selection as choosing between concrete objects (such as yogurt cups or file folders), as illustrated by Sharples and Pérez y Pérez [1]. This also could potentially lead to rather artistic visual mappings of, e.g., physical objects and machines like Clark’s Eureka or Babbage’s Analytical Engine as visual metaphors.

To give alternative perspectives onto the generated stories, a 3-dimensional space-time cube [35] showing the trajectory through a hypothetical 3D story world (see Figure 2G) or a network graph highlighting the connections between the characters, events, and further entities (see Figure 2H), are possible. Altogether, the visualizations are inter-linked through interactions and follow consistent design via color encoding (e.g., characters and locations) and icon usage for special events like attacks.

3.4. Distant-reading of Generated Stories

Zooming out again in the sense of Distant Reading [50], Visual Narrative Nubs also allows for the creation of a whole corpus of outputs, which could then be represented and analyzed further with the help of visualizations. Analysis could be facilitated through juxtaposing masses of outputs (c.p., the “polypoems” by Harrell [52]), whereby visual analysis can support pattern and outlier recognition, in comparison to their pure textual output. Even there, visualizations could augment the corpus’ text displays with named-entities or narrative structures and their connections, like rhyme schemata in poems (e.g., [53]). Similarity between stories of various story generators would be interesting to discover throughout the corpus, so that we are in need for similarity measures (e.g., [54]). Further possibilities are

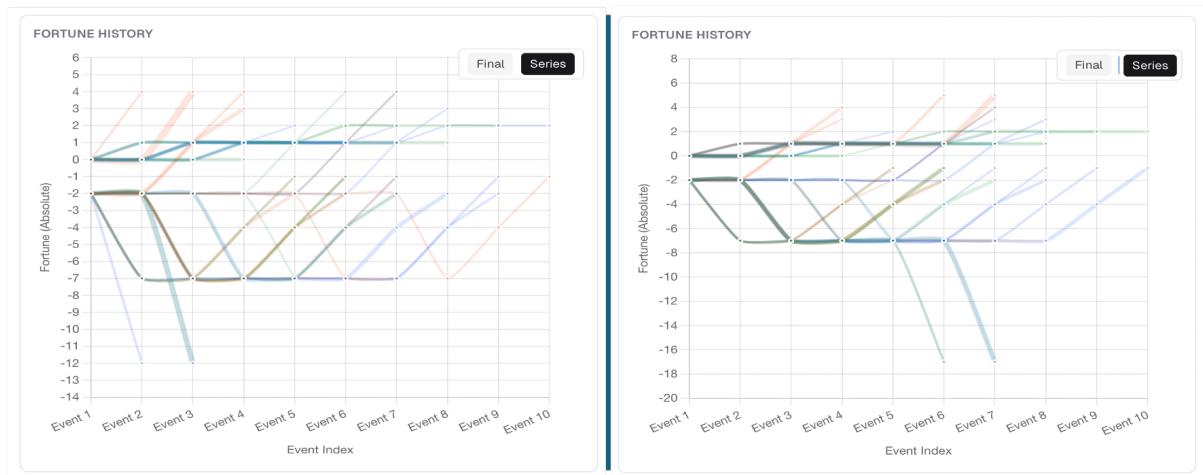


Figure 3: Comparison of two sets of 100 stories with overlapping characters' fortune charts. Left: The stories generated without the “long” parameter, so that stories can end abruptly after one turn. Right: The “long” stories, where the abrupt ending is not allowed. Unfortunately this means only more suffering for the protagonist, as they now can be attacked *and* die in the end, resulting in lower fortune endings.

structural comparisons of plot graphs, lexical distributions, trope frequencies, or stylistic metrics. An example might be the quantitative comparison via visualizations of narrative trajectories, or a fortune chart which shows a characters' final fortune outcomes of all the previously generated stories (see Figure 2I) or the overlapping of all characters fortune plots (see Figure 3). These charts already give senses of the whole story space of a system since it is showing “all” the possible stories and outcomes.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

Visual Narrative Nubs offers a novel solution for visualization-supported exploration and comparison of reimplemented story generators. However, it also presents a few design tensions to be addressed.

First, Narrative Nubs strives for lightweight, reusable miniatures, while visualization systems often accumulate views and interface elements that can quickly become heavy. To remain consistent with the nub philosophy, the visualization layer should itself might be better conceived as a set of *visual nubs*: small, modular, remixable components that encode one design question at a time (e.g., “Which rules fired?” or “Which alternative branches were available?”). Second, while Visual Narrative Nubs aims for a universal and consistent design, it is as yet unclear whether the current concept is flexible enough to represent the diverse story generators without obscuring meaningful distinctions. This includes the range of rule-based systems to more artistic examples [55], and even within a single system there may be multiple software versions. Through further iterative development and user testing, these design tensions will be resolved. But by far not all existing story generators are ‘miniaturizable’ in Narrative Nubs and most likely even less are visualizable, which might call for a subset of specific “Visual Narrative Nubs”.

Ultimately, the visualization layer should augment, not replace, the Narrative Nubs code repository’s inspectability, by scaffolding exploration from overview of the systems toward the code that resembles each of them. A user evaluation of these two approaches in comparison, command line interface versus GUI and visualizations, might be still interesting.

Making intermediate states like rule activations and decision paths more tangible can demystify story generators and support the intended use in research and teaching. If story generation is rendered as a user-centered interactive process, the platform can better embody the project’s “learning by doing” goal; users can manipulate parameters, observe immediate effects, form and evaluate hypotheses about the system’s assumptions in a playful way.

At the same time, visualizations are not neutral. Choosing what to encode as “structure” or “salient

events” implicitly frames what counts as narrative, which becomes especially relevant given critiques of dominant story-line models and calls for alternative narrative framings [56]. Rather than reinforcing archetypal narratives (e.g., a hero’s journey), the design space should remain open to counter-arcs (such as a heroine’s journey [57]) and to stories that center objects, collectives, and societies, not only individual protagonists [32]. Visual Narrative Nubs can thus function as a platform where generator mechanics and narrative theory meet: a place to compare systems technically *and* expose their cultural commitments. To meet these longer-term goals, the linkages between code-based and visualization-supported nubs need to be refined, the design space of depict-able generator characteristics formalized, and prototypes to be evaluated with researchers, educators, and artists to ensure the interface improves learning, comparison, and critical engagement with story generation systems.

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