From Stories to Systems:

Using a Narrative Systems Approach to Inform Pop Culture Narrative Change Grantmaking

by Bridgit Antoinette Evans
Table of Contents

01  Imagination Requested
03  The Five Discoveries
07  Why Narrative Systems?
09  Seeding Narrative Systems
11  How Narrative Systems Work
23  The System Framework
24  The Road Ahead
25  Epilogue: Questions to Consider
26  Appendix: Field and Funder Contributors
Prologue

The Pop Culture Collaborative was founded in October 2016 by a network of philanthropic leaders—primarily women of color—led by Unbound Philanthropy, Nathan Cummings Foundation, and Ford Foundation, who came together to imagine what might be possible if they expanded the impact of their grantmaking by pooling their resources, strategic thinking, and leadership influence to dramatically increase philanthropic investment in the pop culture for social change field.

After many years of experimental funding at the intersection of art, media, and social change, they recognized that due to a lack of infrastructure, networks, and financial support, many past grantmaking strategies (e.g., support for specific creative projects or campaigns) had been implemented in silos. While some funded projects succeeded in creating awakenings in individuals or smaller audiences, they seldom reached mass audience scale. Because they were also rarely implemented within a long-term culture change strategy, most projects were not durable enough to achieve long-term, sustainable shifts in some of the deeply entrenched values and norms that characterize American culture.

These funders realized that they were, in essence, squeezing drops of justice into an ocean largely composed of unjust ideas, rather than supporting a field of practitioners to holistically transform these narrative waters.

The Pop Culture Collaborative was imagined as a laboratory environment for the pop culture for social change field, designed to create an immersive learning and testing environment that could enable funders and field members to discover, together, how best to achieve this depth and scale of narrative transformation in the United States.

What follows is the story of what we’ve learned so far.
Imagination requested.

I’d like you to imagine a vast, swirling ocean. In this ocean, picture a tiny fish swimming around. (In the spirit of pop culture, let’s call him Nemo.) Nemo is doing fish things: eating plankton, checking in with his fish friends, going to fish school. Doing his life.

What Nemo is probably not doing is swimming around thinking, “Water. Water. I’m in water. There’s water all around me.” To Nemo, water isn’t water, it’s reality. It’s his world.

Like Nemo, we are all swimming in a kind of ocean—except instead of water swirling around us, there are narratives. And like Nemo, few of us walk through our days thinking, “Narrative. Narrative. There are narratives all around me.” And yet, these narratives are influencing everything about how we think about, live, and see ourselves in the world. These narratives feel like reality to us—like the air we breathe. They are our world.

The hard truth is that large swaths of the narrative “ocean” in which we currently swim are toxic—poisoned with terrible ideas about who we are, who belongs, and who does not. On the best of days, these ideas make it hard to see through the muck. They distort our sense of self and our faith in our ability to meet each other across our differences. At worst, the ideas swirling in these narrative waters are killing some of us, and our planet. They are separating us from our families, stripping us of our freedom and our lives, and making us feel profoundly hopeless about our nation’s ability to become something other than divided, hurt, angry, distrustful, and broken.

My question to you: What becomes of our imaginations in this toxic environment? Our willingness to believe, to fight, to build something new? And if our most generative superpower is destroyed, how can we possibly see the future that could exist beyond this messy, brutal chapter in America’s story?

At the Pop Culture Collaborative, we are convinced that if we hope to one day create a just and pluralist society in America, we must commit as a community of storytellers, organizers, researchers, strategists, and funders to the hard work of fundamentally transforming the narrative oceans in which we all swim.

The question is ... how?
The Five Discoveries

The Pop Culture Collaborative’s long-term goal is to support the growth of a pop culture for social change field capable of building deep yearning in a true majority of Americans (more than 150 million people) to actively co-create a just and pluralist nation in which everyone is perceived to belong, inherently, and is treated as such.

Over the past year and a half, Collaborative staff and Managing Partners, along with our grantees, Senior Fellows, and cohort members, have commissioned research; convened grantees for learning retreats, work sessions, and community gatherings; and conducted dozens of interviews with field practitioners in order to investigate the question of how narratives and stories could become catalysts for widespread cultural change at scale.

We also studied a range of long-term culture change processes—from political movements to consumer marketing strategies and the emergence of fandoms and subcultures—including marriage equality, trickle-down economics, the normalization of bottled water, and the mainstreaming of 12-step recovery programs. As grantmakers, we did so because we needed to better understand how to efficiently contribute resources to the growth of a field capable of transforming the narrative environments in which we are all immersed.

What we learned now guides our thinking about how widespread cultural change happens, how the pop culture for social change field can intentionally drive such change, and how philanthropy can support it to do so.

We now design and evolve our grantmaking strategy with five key assumptions in mind:

1 | THE GOAL IS TO TRANSFORM NARRATIVE OCEANS.

First, as a broad sector, we need to challenge our impulse to change “the narrative” on a particular issue, and instead embrace the hard work of transforming whole narrative environments—that is, the ecosystems of narratives, ideas, and cultural norms that shape the behaviors, mindsets,

---

1 The theory and framework I am exploring pertains to the design and implementation of a culture change strategy, one of numerous approaches encompassed in the broader cultural strategy field of practice. We find the definition of Cultural Strategy developed by Pop Culture Collaborative Senior Fellow Erin Potts with a network of strategists to be incredibly helpful in delineating other approaches for which strategists are building frameworks and theory. To read, visit https://bit.ly/popcollabdefinitions.
and worldviews of mass audiences. Efforts to change the narrative often result in specific one-directional message frames, campaigns, or story projects that may have a short-term effect, but do not measurably transform cultural rules or norms. These tactics are akin to squeezing a drop of red food coloring into a vast ocean of blue water and expecting the ocean to turn purple. Our disparate stories and narrative experiences—the ink drops—may swirl in the water briefly, but they will quickly be consumed by the vast and voracious narrative waters that normalize injustice.

We believe that transforming entire narrative environments is necessary, and that this change process begins with the widespread adoption of new behavioral instincts that, when embodied by millions of people in a community or society, create the conditions for enduring shifts in cultural norms, and ultimately, in values.

2 | THE WORK IS TO ACHIEVE NARRATIVE IMMERSION.

In order to transform narrative environments (“oceans”), we have to achieve a depth of narrative immersion such that people experience a fictional way of life as possible, and begin to express first yearning, then desire, and finally, demand for this fiction to be made real. The depth and scale of cultural change we seek simply cannot be achieved through philanthropy’s continued support of only individual, one-off story projects or campaigns. Instead, widespread cultural change is most reliably achieved when mass audiences are immersed, over time, in new narrative environments powered by a multitude of coordinated story experiences that express diverse and complex perspectives while also carrying the same core ideas and narratives.

During a long-term culture change process, narrative immersion can occur in different ways and at different scales for different audiences. In some cases, smaller groups of people become immersed in different stories that carry similar ideas, and the cumulative effect of these different viewing experiences creates a shared experience of narrative immersion in a narrative ocean. For instance, crime procedurals represent the majority of American television dramas on the air. While each show involves different characters and storylines, most share some key narrative ideas. “Almost all of these shows make wrongful police behavior seem right,” writes Rashad Robinson of Color of Change, “presenting illegal, unethical, and immoral behavior on the part of police and other authorities as justifiable—or even necessary—while carefully rationalizing or otherwise dismissing any objections to that behavior...
making heroes out of police who break the rules, violate our rights, and cause harm.”

Narrative immersion can also happen because a majority of people in a society are experiencing the same cultural moment at the same time. Because of the highly dispersed nature of our modern media landscape, with thousands of television networks and online media outlets, streaming services, and social networks deteriorating our access to communal experience, these moments of shared immersion are rare. Election night in 2008 immersed most Americans in an experience of “Yes We Can!” euphoria felt around the world; and the #BlackLivesMatter uprisings of Summer 2020 similarly have fundamentally recomposed the narrative ocean around policing for most Americans.

3 | TO ACHIEVE IMMERSION, FUND NARRATIVE NETWORKS.

The sheer scale and depth of narrative immersion we need can’t possibly be achieved by one organization, company, or person. By studying other sectors that have achieved mass audience narrative immersion in new ideas, narratives, and behavioral norms—the government, corporate brands, school systems, religious communities, anti-smoking advocates, the Civil Rights and marriage equality movements—our team came to understand that they all rely on broad, cross-sector, coordinated narrative networks of individuals, groups, and institutions we call narrative drivers.

To build narrative power—by creating deep narrative immersion in new narrative environments—philanthropy must substantially expand the resources available to field practitioners to work together with shared goals and intentionally aligned narrative and cultural strategies.

4 | NARRATIVE SYSTEMS ACCELERATE THE PACE OF CHANGE.

Our analysis revealed one component common to many successful culture change processes: an intentionally designed and activated narrative system—a framework that outlines the coordinated ecosystem of pop culture stories, narrative archetypes, mental models, and behavioral norms that are designed to work together to gradually overwhelm and replace one narrative environment with a new one. While new narrative environments take shape in many ways, use of a narrative system framework can dramatically accelerate the pace at which a new narrative environment takes shape. Moreover, when a narrative network

---

shares a clear culture shift goal, theory for how a new narrative
environment will take shape, and a strategic framework that
operationalizes this theory, this network can attain far greater reach and
coordination, and, ultimately, narrative transformation.

5 | THE WORK ALSO INVOLVES SHIFTING POWER IN HOLLYWOOD.

“What lies beyond inclusion?” I first posed this question to panelists at a
pop culture summit our Managing Partners hosted in Los Angeles in
2016. Together, the speakers—organizer Rashad Robinson, filmmaker
Patricia Riggen, actor Daniel Dae Kim, and production executive Andrew
Wang—considered whether Hollywood’s longstanding goals of diversity
and inclusion were enough to achieve justice and equity for BIPOC artists
and other communities harmed by the stories generated by this powerful
industry.

A year later, I asked artist and disability inclusion advocate Lawrence
Carter-Long the same question. His response was revelatory: “Access is
being able to get into a party. Inclusion is being invited to the party.
Beyond inclusion lies innovation, when you are the one throwing the
party—and maybe even reimagining how a party is thrown.”

Carter-Long’s analysis reaffirmed an instinct our team has had since the
that panel in 2016: representation and inclusion are not sufficient goals
for our work. As philanthropic and entertainment industry funders and
financiers, we need to retrain our sights on support for innovation in
storytelling—new pipelines, incubators, production funds, and creative
processes that center the agency and vision of people historically
excluded from sites of power and harmed by toxic narratives.

It is our belief that this approach will more reliably build power for these
communities and spark new narrative oceans in the United States that
are rooted in justice, equity, and pluralist belonging.
Why Narrative Systems?

To answer this question, I'd like to begin with a story. It's an astonishingly simple story. In fact, it has only six words:

America is the land of opportunity.

During our research and discovery process, this story captivated us. This epic tale—of a land where the streets are paved with gold and anyone willing to work hard has an equal shot at the good life—has inspired millions of immigrants to endure long journeys over land and sea to reach American soil.

We wondered, How did this story survive for so many generations? How did it migrate around the world? Why does it have such power, particularly given how many aspects of American culture and history seem to contradict this tale of possibility and opportunity?

What soon became clear was that even a story as powerful as this one could not have survived for so long if it did not live at the heart of a narrative ocean that constantly reinforces the core ideas of American opportunity: rugged individualism; a fierce devotion to the pursuit of wealth and the power to dominate; the glamorizing of competition; the devaluing of people unable to escape poverty; the sanctity of the heteronormative nuclear family.

Many people assume that this narrative environment evolved organically, naturally following the currents of culture until it became the bedrock of American exceptionalist ideology that it is today. Of course, that isn't the whole story. For centuries, ship captains, slave traders, politicians, merchants, artists, and journalists told and retold this tale of opportunity.

But in the 1950s, during the early days of the mass media era, the U.S. government took the bold step of partnering with Madison Avenue ad agencies, corporate brands, and network television executives to conceptualize an ecosystem of stories aimed at promoting middle class ascendency and home ownership to white working class people. This intervention, which firmly tied American success to the goalposts of marriage, home, and family, harnessed the emergent power of pop culture—movies, commercials, television shows, music, print ads—to broadly disseminate images of smiling, white, heterosexual married couples living in new homes with their happy children. These iconic
characters, always white, drove to their good jobs in shiny new cars, brushed their teeth in glistening new bathrooms, and worked hard to keep up with the Joneses who lived down the street in their quaint cul de sac communities. Steadily, pop culture stories worked to normalize this interpretation of the American Dream.

Over time, this narrative system created a new—fictional—reality in the public imagination. No longer needing the system’s creators to generate content in pop culture, artists, politicians, faith leaders, news anchors and journalists, parents, and teachers began to riff on these stories to create their own. From Father Knows Best to The Brady Bunch, and in the wake of the Civil Rights era, The Jeffersons to The Cosby Show, an active call and response took shape: stories inspired more stories, which compelled more stories. The American Dream narrative system generated a self-sustaining narrative environment that persists to this day.

Social justice movements were not immune to the power of this narrative system. When Martin Luther King Jr. uttered the words, “I have a dream” in 1968, and the marriage equality movement declared “Love Is Love” nearly 40 years later, they were both strategically tapping into the core ideas of the American Dream narrative system to increase their resonance and build narrative power.

The tension here is, of course, that this narrative system wasn’t designed with the best interests of most of us in mind. In truth, it effectively served as an invitation to millions of working class white people to embrace their privilege and lean into the comfort they felt in white homogenous spaces. Black and Indigenous people, people of color, immigrants, women, queer, transgender, and disabled people have placed our lives and bodies on the line in an effort to belong in this ruthlessly inequitable story of American opportunity. But this narrow vision has never actually suited us. Like hand-me-down jeans, this reality pinches our skin, restricts our movement, and leaves us feeling like failures of the very dream we hold so dear.

Maybe it's time we let it go.
Seeding Narrative Systems

The proliferation of the American Dream narrative ocean illustrates how narrative systems can take shape through intentional, organized collaborations among different entities or sectors who function as a centralizing force within a broader narrative network. As discussed, the Love Is Love narrative system generally follows this process of collaboratively designed strategy and activation by a multi-sector narrative network spanning movements, advertising, the arts, entertainment, and big media.

But narrative systems can also emerge from the bottom up, when a specific creative collaboration sparks a pattern of similar stories that form an immersive narrative environment over time. Such is the case with the narrative ocean that normalized cops as heroes. In her groundbreaking 2016 series exploring Hollywood’s nearly 100 years of collaboration with police departments, Washington Post columnist Alyssa Rosenberg tells the tale of how a 1940s television actor planted the seed for a narrative environment that would ultimately fuel decades of police violence:

“Jack Webb got the idea for Dragnet when he met Marty Wynn, an LAPD detective who was working as technical adviser for a movie in which Webb played a forensics investigator. In pursuit of the access that would let him market Dragnet as an authentic look at police work, Webb forged an extraordinary partnership with LAPD chief William Parker and department publicity wizard Stanley Sheldon—accepting stringent censorship from the police department in exchange for story ideas, logistical help, and a patina of truth. That bargain would help create America’s first enduring cop drama and a model for police storytelling for decades to come... The show quickly became a model.”

While this inter-industry collaboration sought to distort the truth about police and communities of color, similar stories have sparked narrative patterns, and ultimately, narrative systems that have dramatically expanded public imagination about what human beings are capable of. When sci fi authors and Hollywood screenwriters first began partnering with scientists to tell the story of what the future looked like, their

---

depictions were full of wonder, making the prospect of interplanetary travel, discovery, and coexistence feel exciting. In this vision of the future, depictions of pluralist culture were widespread, challenging viewers to imagine new ways of relating to one another, navigating complex shifts in power, defending justice, and overcoming xenophobia. (It’s no surprise that *Star Trek* was the only show Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. allowed his children to stay up late to watch in the 1960s.)

Like the example of policing, early sci-fi stories sparked a pattern of storytelling that gave birth to a genre that seeded a new narrative ocean. From *Star Trek* to *The Expanse* and the Afrofuturist metropolis of Wakanda, this narrative environment helped audiences to believe in a future of boundless possibility, where curiosity led to incredible discoveries, and daring to step out one’s familiar to forge bonds with people—and species—different from us made us more powerful and whole.

---

How Narrative Systems Work

The Collaborative’s narrative systems approach is predicated on the belief—confirmed by George Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory and other neuro, cognitive, and social sciences—that when consistently immersed in pop culture storyworlds that carry transformative ideas, characters, behaviors, and ways of living, people begin to feel that the alternate realities depicted in these worlds are not only possible, they are preferable.

Grounded in this belief and the above-mentioned assumptions, our operating theory supports the idea that these pop culture story systems—created by mass audience storytellers (entertainment, advertising, media) and social justice movements from historically excluded communities and coordinated through a narrative system—can produce cultural change at scale.

To refine our thinking, our staff, Managing Partners, and a working group of grantees and senior fellows worked with Senior Fellow Ryan Senser and his research partner Eleanor Morison over an 18-month period to develop a narrative system framework that expresses a theory of how new narrative environments can take shape in mass culture. This framework seeks to clarify the components of a narrative system (and the relationship between them): the culture shift goal, mental models, narrative archetypes, specific stories, contagion experiences, and desired behavioral norms.

A bit later, we will define these terms, but first, I want to share our theory of how narrative systems drive towards a specific culture change goal. It goes like this:

Specific pop culture stories—shaped by narrative archetypes that carry mental models into mass culture—gradually spark an inciting experience or series of experiences that compels new behavioral instincts. These instincts, when routinely embodied by a person, gradually dislodge unhelpful mental models and beliefs, creating space for the new mental models and beliefs to assume a dominant position in this person’s psyche. These new mental

---

5 George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, Living with Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process, Annenberg Center for Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1994. The Cultivation Theory asserts that exposure to media, over time, subtly “cultivates” viewers’ perceptions of reality and socializes most people into standardized roles and behaviors of a particular society.

6 Please see Appendix for a list of all participants in the Pop Culture Collaborative’s narrative system co-design process.
models and behaviors, once expressed by millions of people, create the momentum needed to achieve a specific culture change goal.

Let’s break this down.

**CULTURE CHANGE GOAL**

During the narrative system design process, collaborators may spend significant time constructing the culture change goal. That’s because this goal reflects both the vision and the mandate that will guide a narrative network throughout multiple years of implementation. Ideally, the goal is simple and pragmatic, while still expressing bold ambition and emotional stakes.

For instance, the Pop Culture Collaborative has established the following culture change goal:

**Goal:** To support the growth of a pop culture for social change field capable of building deep yearning in most Americans (more than 150 million people) to actively co-create a just and pluralist nation in which everyone is perceived to belong, inherently, and is treated as such.

Let’s dig into the construction of this goal.

First, the goal defines the role of cultural strategies in relation to the broader social change process: the pop culture for social change field’s role is not to create the systems and structures of a just society. That is the work of social justice movement organizations and elected officials, with whom practitioners in the pop culture for social change field are often deeply aligned. Instead, this field’s role is to use pop culture stories and other narrative experiences to activate the imagination, emotional life, and desire for change in people such that the structural solutions proffered by movements feel like the answers to people’s deep yearning.

Second, the goal explicitly defines the desired scale of audience the Collaborative seeks to reach in partnership with grantees, fellows, Managing Partners, and other allies: at least 150 million people. These words serve as a constant reminder of our mandate to invest in the field’s ability to reach the majority of people in the United States.

Third, the goal reflects the new way of life the Collaborative seeks: a nation rooted in pluralist culture, which we define as “a cultural
condition in which the majority of people in a community or nation are actively engaged in the hard and delicate work of belonging together in a just society.”

**NARRATIVE ARCHETYPES**

Across the field, numerous efforts are underway to define what narratives are. Many of these definitions involve a lot of words, sentences, and semicolons. We have found it helpful to distinguish between a passive definition, i.e., one that helps clarify meaning on a philosophical level, and a strategic definition that helps those designing strategy to stay aligned in their methodology.

This is perhaps controversial, but in the context of designing a narrative system, I will venture to say that it doesn't really matter how we define “a narrative.” Instead, it is critical that grantmakers and cultural strategists begin to share an understanding of the definition and function of narrative archetypes in the context of narrative systems.

They are the tools of our trade.

Specifically, we need to understand the two ways that narrative archetypes function in the context of narrative strategy. First, we need to analyze how they populate and shape the narrative waters we swim in. We need to understand why we study them during the narrative analysis phase of a narrative system design process. And second, we need to recognize how they live in the imaginations and craft of artists who draw upon them to create the stories we all enjoy.

*Let’s begin in the narrative waters.*

For those who study literature, myths, and culture, the common understanding of a narrative archetype is a story that recurs in culture such that its meaning is understood by most people. We have come to think about narrative archetypes in this way:

> **Narrative Archetype:** a story people already know; a story template that most people recognize and to which most people have a reliable response.⁷

The most powerful, transformative stories in our culture are not new stories. They are often very old stories that have been told again and again.

---

in different forms by different people over hundreds if not thousands of years. Because of our familiarity with them, such stories operate like narrative road maps in our individual (and collective) imagination. When the story is activated in our minds, we immediately recognize it, know how it unfolds, and who the heroes and villains are, understand the stakes, and anticipate the conclusion. Think Romeo and Juliet.

I often joke that narrative archetypes function in my psyche like ‘80s pop songs on the radio. When the first few notes of John Cougar Mellencamp’s “Jack and Diane” or Lionel Richie’s “All Night Long” burst through the car speakers, I’m often surprised (and mortified!) to discover that I can belt every word at the top of my lungs without ever having memorized the words. Who put those lyrics in my head? Likely, there is no one culprit; rather, repeated exposure to these songs over time has embedded them, and their meaning, in the recesses of my brain.

In 2018, I was invited to speak at a pop culture for social change retreat in Dartington, England. Here, among more than 100 talented and respected artists and activists, I had the thrilling opportunity to lead this very British group in an impromptu choral performance of Celine Dion’s “All By Myself,” made famous in the film, Bridget Jones’ Diary. It was one of the highlights of my career to witness the startled, slightly horrified looks on some faces as the words fell from their mouths, as if by magic. After the performance, we talked about the big ideas carried deep into our consciousness by songs like this: the tragic nature of singledom, the importance of being loved or at least wanted, the societal pressure to see companionship or marriage as a sign of personal completion.

“All By Myself” is a pop culture story shaped by narrative archetypes including the story of lost love and also of the Phoenix rising. Celine Dion’s iconic crescendo at the end of the song can be interpreted as a clear signal of the protagonist’s choice to defy her sad fate and live to love another day. The song follows an old, familiar story template, and as a result, the ideas in the song resonate deeply. And they stick.

Mapping people’s familiarity with different iconic story templates is essential work for narrative and cultural strategy designers. When members of a narrative network—artists, strategists, movement leaders, journalists, advertisers, political leaders, educators—analyze how these narrative archetypes function in the imagination of a target audience, we gain a more sophisticated understanding of how new stories can spark shifts in thought and behavior.
Now let’s look narrative archetypes in the storytelling process.

I mentioned earlier that understanding the function of narrative archetypes matters for two reasons. First, this analysis helps us to get to better ideas during the strategy design process, whether it be for the planning of culture change processes or grantmaking programs. Second, when artists and other content creators leverage narrative archetypes to give shape to the films, television shows, songs, books, social videos, op-eds, speeches, lesson plans, and other story experiences we create every day, they can touch a chord that activates people in specific ways.

Let’s return to our young lovers in Verona. If I said to you, “This is a Romeo and Juliet kind of story,” what would that mean to you? Likely, if you have attended high school in the U.S. and other European-colonized cultures, you would know that the story I’m going to tell you was about love. Ill-fated, tragic, epic love, to be precise. You might also know that the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet is not only that two young people lose their lives, but that the broader society (embodied by their parents and adults) is so incapable of honoring and protecting the beauty of their love that they destroy it. You would understand that the story I’m about to share is about love and societal failure.

This tale of young love gone terribly awry is based on the very old stories of “star-crossed lovers” that have recurred so often in Indigenous, Islamic, West African, Roman, and other cultures that most people know some version of the story by heart. Thanks to a legion of sacred texts, plays, novels, pop songs, and films, this story template has traveled far and wide in American culture.

Now imagine that a filmmaker used this story template—of great love destroyed by societal failure—to tell the story of two American teens. One was born in the U.S. with citizenship and the other was born in Haiti and undocumented. The artist’s choice to tap into this narrative archetype is strategic: it casts these young people as brave heroes; characterizes their love as precious, rare, and worth fighting for; and signals to you, their audience, that this story won’t end well. It also produces a visceral response to injustice. Most important, it allows your imagination to intuitively identify the villain in the story as whomever is thwarting their ability to freely express their love—in this case, parents whose bigoted attitudes prevent them from seeing the power of this couple’s love. As

---

8 The Pop Culture Collaborative studied this narrative archetype during our immersion in The Narrative Forest, an installation curated by Ryan Senser and Eleanor Morrison for our Narrative System Design cohort retreat held in March 2018. This project analyzed over a dozen narrative archetypes that live in the public imagination and could shape content designed to create a narrative ocean that reinforces pluralist culture.
with *Romeo and Juliet*, the story also indicts the broader society that shaped the parents’ views (for instance, racist politicians and law enforcement whose values are corrupt and out of date). Because we know how this story ends and have already created meaning around these characters, this artist’s story might make your heart hurt, or leave you distraught, yearning for the world to be a place where authentic love can thrive, and everyone can belong. It may spark a bitterness towards unfairness. With a strong audience experience strategy around this story, you might even feel resolved to do something to ensure that teen love can never be destroyed by cruel immigration policies and racist beliefs.

Now, what if the same artist instead tapped into the “boy meets girl” narrative archetype to tell their tale of teen love? How would that story unfold? What are the key plot points? What is the element of suspense in the story? How does it likely end? Chances are, if you grew up in the U.S. on a healthy diet of mainstream rom coms, you already know.

So do your audiences. That’s the power of narrative archetypes in the storytelling process.

**MENTAL MODELS**

Earlier, I shared a story expressing our theory of how pop culture stories can drive narrative immersion: *pop culture stories, shaped by powerful narrative archetypes, carry new mental models into mass culture.*

In the case of the “star-crossed lovers” narrative archetype, a range of ideas are carried into the public imagination. One is that love *should* conquer all. This idea is so pervasive, so dominant in the American psyche, that when many of us hear a story that carries this idea, we instinctively accept it as true and right, and make sense within the storyworld (and the real world) accordingly. When we are immersed in a story that carries ideas that contradict this dominant mental model, our imaginations will instinctively reject the story—and often, the storyteller—as wrong, poorly executed, out of sync.

This idea, that great, passionate love can and should overcome cruelty and corruption, and be protected at all costs, is an example of what narrative strategists refer to as a *mental model*.

Here is the definition that we have found helpful:
**Mental model:** a foundational idea about the world and how it works that drives behavior and either enables consent or sparks rejection of certain conditions or propositions.⁹

If narrative archetypes are the vehicles through which we create stories that can change people and the world, mental models are the passengers, carried by these narrative archetypes and story experiences into the psyches of people and the narrative environment of a society.

Narrative and cultural strategists are painfully aware that narrative archetypes can also carry inhumane mental models to audiences. While many people experience *Romeo and Juliet* and walk away with the idea that love should conquer all, there are others who connect to a very different idea from this story. Perhaps, for them, the death of these young lovers reinforces the idea that unbridled love is dangerous. Painful. To be avoided. Perhaps this mental model more closely aligns with their lived experience of heartbreak, isolation, or trauma. It might reinforce the ideas that shape the dominant narrative environment in their particular culture, like the real danger of forbidden love across race, gender, or class. To these people, the dominant mental model is that love is dangerous. It makes us vulnerable or unsafe, while the idea that love should conquer all is more deeply buried in their psyches, fragile and delicate.

This seems like a good time to acknowledge that the human psyche is gloriously messy. We each hold thousands of contradictory mental models in our subconscious. Some are useful. Others, not so much.

At a Pop Culture Collaborative narrative system working group meeting held in December 2018, participants discussed the concept of gravity. Ryan Senser pointed out that “this mental model helps us understand that if we step off a cliff, we will likely fall and break numerous bones. It keeps us safe.” Others, like the scarcity mindset, or a mindset that leads us to feel that love, connection, and empathy only endanger us, are harmful. These mental models make us accept rhetoric that tells us that we don’t have room for more immigrants, that forging caring bonds with people different from us will only end badly, and that opportunity is finite.

In a narrative system design process, mental model analysis is essential. The work involves identifying the dominant and subdominant mental models that live in millions of people, analyzing whether they are helpful or harmful in relationship to our culture shift goal, and finally, engaging in

⁹ Source: Ryan Senser.
the process of strategically articulating transformative mental models that can, over time, spark a restructuring of a person’s worldview.

Narrative and cultural strategists use audience research, including cultural trend analysis, in-field ethnography, quantitative studies, and other methods, to scan the cultural landscape to surface mental models and assess which ones are dominant and harmful, and which ones are submerged or secondary. Through the use of narrative and cultural strategies, especially pop culture story experiences, narrative networks can gradually dislodge dominant mental models that are harmful, and replace them with mental models that are just and pluralist. (For instance, the Pop Culture Collaborative's new Becoming America Fund will support grantees and other partners to dislodge the Scarcity mental model and replace it with a mental model rooted in Abundance.)

Unlike a communications message, which reaches the public in press releases, campaign documents, published essays, and similar communications, mental models operate at the level of an architectural blueprint: they are components of the narrative system framework that enable narrative and cultural strategists to stay aligned as they design, test, and implement a strategy aimed at seeding a new narrative environment.

This distinction between a communications message and a mental model is critical: mental models should never—ever—be confused with public-facing messages or content. The written articulation of mental models, a component of the narrative system blueprint, is the inner scaffolding of a strategy or story concept, not the end product.

**STORY EXPERIENCES**

As a reminder, the goal of a narrative system design and activation process is to catalyze an ecosystem of coordinated stories—an immersive narrative environment—that reflect and reinforce transformative mental models and behavioral norms. In this narrative environment, different kinds of stories play different roles in the culture change process.

I’d like to focus on four types of stories:

- **Pop Culture Experiences**
  In the narrative system activation stage, artists and story strategists leverage the power of narrative archetypes to tell

---

10 For an overview of a number of audience research methods, we invite you to read the Pop Culture Collaborative’s recently published funder learning tool, *Grantmaking Strategy Spotlight: Culture Change Research* at https://bit.ly/culturechangeresearch.
wildly diverse stories that all carry the same underlying mental models to audiences.

These stories can take the form of movies, television shows, digital content, advertisements, songs and music videos, books, video and board games, immersive experiential projects, VR/AR, fan-generated content and cosplay, news stories, essays, and even political speeches. The common thread: they are shaped by narrative archetypes and enable mass audiences to repeatedly interact with transformative mental models and behavioral norms.

We often relish the things that make our stories unique, but in the narrative change field, “we have to be just as interested in the big ideas that our stories share in common.”

**• Spectacles**
As new narrative environments take shape, certain story experiences operate like fulcrums around which the broader range of coordinated stories swirl. These spectacle moments most tightly express the core ideas of a narrative system, and help audiences interpret other stories they encounter through the lens of specific mental models or behavioral norms.

The image of millions of pink hats flooding the streets of America and globally during the first Women’s March in 2017 was a spectacle that expressed the story of the rising resistance in the U.S. Likewise, the image of the Black Lives Matter letters painted on the street leading to the White House—or of activist “Bree” Newsome scaling the flagpole to yank down the Confederate flag South Carolina’s state capitol during the 2015 Black Lives Matter uprisings—conveyed the story of a youthful, defiant movement rising to power in the wake of tragedy.

**• Revelations of Belonging**
As more and more people become immersed in a new narrative ocean, and begin to express new behaviors, individuals may experience revelatory moments in which they discover that many people feel the same private beliefs, yearnings or pain points as they do. The awareness of their place in a crowd of likeminded people is an important

---

storymaking moment within a person’s journey of change. Often, the realization that their views or beliefs are shared by a majority of people inspires the confidence a person needs to more publicly test new behaviors once deemed too dangerous or unpopular to express.

In a Kaiser Family Foundation poll conducted in June 2020, researchers found that 10% of the U.S. population had “personally attended a protest or rally in the last 3 months either to protest police violence or in support of Black Lives Matter or other anti-racist causes,” making them one of the largest protests in U.S. history. Within these crowds were millions of people of every race—young and older, in cities, suburbs, and rural towns—who were likely attending their first anti-racism protests. There are a myriad of drivers of this new behavior, but one of them was surely the effect of discovering, through social media posts and news stories, that millions of other people also yearned to stand up and cry no to America’s legacy of racial terror.

• **Portal Moments**
  Often born out of crisis, disaster, or other great change, portal moments are unplanned but cataclysmic events that force an abrupt cracking open of the public imagination about what is possible, where old habits of life and society are destabilized to such an extent that the prospect of a new way of living suddenly feels reasonable, even necessary, for our survival. Crises become portal moments when narrative drivers—social justice organizers, pop culture storytellers, journalists, educators, and politicians—use narrative strategies to make meaning out of them.

  Millions of people began to view the COVID-19 crisis as a portal moment when Arundhati Roy’s searing essay, “The Pandemic Is a Portal,” spread like wildfire on social media, normalizing the story of the pandemic as an opportunity for humankind to leave behind old, outdated ways of being in order to step onto a path towards justice. Similarly, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade sparked a national crisis that the Movement for Black Lives effectively transformed into a portal moment that

---

has accelerated the pace at which deep systemic change can be achieved.

Not all crises lead to positive, life-affirming portal moments. September 11th was a tragic event that could have deepened America’s bonds with the global community. Instead, the U.S. government invested in a sprawling ecosystem of narrative infrastructure—including local and national news stories, TV writers rooms and film sets, ad campaigns, legal briefs, and political speeches—to advance a story about the inherent danger of Muslim people and cultures. By creating this new narrative environment, the government quickly amassed the narrative power needed to advance catastrophic legislation, cultural norms, and mental models. Today, nearly 20 years later, we are still submerged in this toxic narrative ocean. Narratives tested after 9/11 have helped legitimize anti-immigrant exclusion, the Muslim ban, the hyper-militarization of police, the expansion of mass incarceration, and much more.

I need to say this again: crises become portal moments when narrative networks help audiences interpret them as such. In the fight for social justice, philanthropy needs to invest in the narrative infrastructure that will enable the pop culture for social change field to recognize portal moments when they arise, and effectively shape how the American public makes meaning out of them.

Together, pop culture stories, spectacle moments, revelations of belonging, and when present, portal moments, work together to churn the waters of an existing narrative ocean, gradually transforming these waters to reflect just ideas and behavioral norms.

INCITING EXPERIENCES

Deep immersion in a continuum of coordinated stories, shaped by narrative archetypes and carrying new mental models, can over time spark an inciting experience that fundamentally reorients a person’s understanding of themselves and/or the world around them.

Inciting Experience: a profound experience of transformation in which a person changes in ways that lead them to behave differently than before, often making choices and taking actions in
a manner in keeping with the new mental models that have
dislodged and replaced harmful ones.\textsuperscript{14}

Our theory contends that inciting experiences can be born out of a deep engagement or investment in a new narrative environment infused with pop culture content. Initially, such an experience may produce curiosity. Gradually, the idea of living in a world more like the fictional world becomes preferable to reality, ultimately producing an emotional yearning for a new way of life. These experiences can change beliefs and assumptions, change motivations, and change relationships and expectations related to others (or even a sense of accountability to others).

When these experiences are multiplied across mass culture, a collective yearning emerges, and can evolve into widespread desire and, subsequently, majoritarian demand to make fiction real—to create the culture, systems, and norms that transform imagined ways of being into an actual new way of life. When shaped by pluralist values and mental models, this public mandate, and the ideas that have shaped it, create a more hospitable cultural condition in which social justice organizations can advocate and organize for enduring structural change.

**DESIRED BEHAVIORS**

Pop culture stories, shaped by powerful narrative archetypes and carrying transformative mental models, can compel new behaviors.

**Desired Behaviors**: a set of normalized behaviors that effects meaningful social change when scaled across society among individuals and groups.\textsuperscript{15}

New behaviors, expressed routinely by most people in a culture or community, create new cultural norms and enduring values. For example, the Collaborative has identified a set of pluralist behaviors that we believe pop culture storytellers are uniquely positioned to normalize in American culture. One is the instinct to step out of one’s familiar realms to cross borders—emotional, cultural, political, and/or geographic—and forge bonds with people different from us. If most Americans routinely expressed this culturally fluid behavior, we believe we can become a nation driven by more expansive concepts of identity, borders, and relationships to land.

\textsuperscript{14} Source: Ryan Senser.
\textsuperscript{15} Source: Ryan Senser.
The System Framework

Before you begin exploring the Narrative System Framework (below), let’s revisit the theory I shared of how pop culture stories can drive widespread cultural change:

Specific **pop culture stories**—shaped by **narrative archetypes** that carry **mental models** into mass culture—gradually spark an **inciting experience or series of experiences** that compels new **behavioral instincts**. These instincts, when routinely embodied by a person, gradually dislodge unhelpful mental models and beliefs, creating space for the new mental models and beliefs to assume a dominant position in this person’s psyche. These new mental models and behaviors, once expressed by millions of people, create the momentum needed to achieve a specific **culture change goal**.

Now take a look at the Narrative System Framework below. You can see how this story plays out along a single strand of the overall system framework: narrative archetypes (NA) shape specific stories experiences (S), which gradually create an inciting experience (E) that moves new mental models (MM) into a dominant position in a person’s imagination, compelling new behavioral instincts (B).

You’ll also notice that some components of the strand are different sizes. This is intended to denote the comparative significance of this system component in the process of designing or activating the system.

Now, let’s zoom out and look at the entire framework, which illustrates how a coordinated set of narrative archetypes, stories, inciting experiences, and mental models work together to create a new narrative ocean that compels new behaviors, and ultimately new norms and values.

This framework is intended to be read in two directions:

**A TOOL FOR NARRATIVE SYSTEM DESIGN**

Read from the inside out, the framework becomes a mechanical tool in the narrative system design process, helping strategy teams (including both field practitioners and grantmakers) define the desired behavioral norms they seek, and the new mental models, inciting experiences,
specific stories, and narrative archetypes that they believe can produce these behavioral instincts.

**A TOOL FOR SYSTEM ACTIVATION**

Read from the outside in, the framework becomes a road map for the narrative system activation process, helping a narrative network stay aligned through the implementation stages required to create new narrative environments: narrative archetypes shape the creation of a content universe of specific stories and other narrative experiences that carry new mental models to mass audiences, sparking inciting experiences that gradually dislodge and replace harmful mental models with transformative ones, and compel new behaviors.

Take a moment to explore this Narrative System Framework. Notice what makes sense to you, and where you still have questions. Don’t forget to write your thoughts down. This is a work-in-progress learning tool that will be refined based on feedback from partners like you.

**The Road Ahead**

Since its launch in 2017, the Pop Culture Collaborative has dispersed more than $12 million in grants and other support to more than 75 grantees, senior fellows, cultural strategists, and narrative researchers with the goal of contributing to the growth of a field capable of achieving narrative change goals at scale. This year, we will launch the Becoming America Fund, a multimillion philanthropic strategy that will support a powerful network of pop culture for social change practitioners to help millions of Americans move from a mindset of fear and isolation to one of imagination, curiosity, and faith in America’s potential to become something new: a pluralist nation where everyone belongs.

Becoming America is our first large-scale exploration of the role that narrative system design and network organizing can play in helping the field to achieve this scale and depth of cultural change. We are honored to begin this work in community with all of you. We invite your feedback, and look forward to evolving our thinking and these ideas in response.

*Bridgit Antoinette Evans* is an artist, culture change strategist, and philanthropic leader with more than 20 years experience in the pop culture for social change field. She has served as Executive Director of the Pop Culture Collaborative since 2017.
Narrative System Framework
A TOOL FOR STRATEGY DESIGN AND ACTIVATION

Framework and Visual Concept by Ryan Senser | Creative Direction by Pop Culture Collaborative

Motivator
Narrative Archetype
Specific Story
Inciting Experience
Mental Model
Desired Behaviors

CORE MOTIVATOR
The primary motivating emotional driver that a narrative both taps into and embodies, the main source of a narrative’s power to influence us.

NARRATIVE ARCHETYPE
A story template recurring in a culture over time that people widely recognize and understand, to which they have a predictable response.

SPECIFIC STORY
A story expressed through and individual piece (or series) of content, rooted in a narrative archetype, carrying with it a set of mental models.

INCITING EXPERIENCE
An experience of storytelling (i.e., immersion in a narrative and the mental models it seeds) that reinforces or shifts someone’s worldview.

MENTAL MODEL (EMBEDDED IDEA)
A deeply embedded, foundational understanding about the world and how it works, which generally directs or even compels our behaviors, and also leads us to accept or reject present conditions or propositions.

DESIRED BEHAVIORS
A set of habitualized and normalized behaviors that effects meaningful social change when scaled across society (among individual and groups).
Epilogue

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Below are some questions that may help you dig deeper into this tool and visual framework.

FOR GRANTMAKERS

• Funding pop culture narrative change work involves supporting efforts to achieve narrative immersion (i.e., coordinated story experiences) and the narrative infrastructure needed to achieve this immersion. Where are you most likely to focus your grantmaking?

• What process would be most effective in bringing together your grantees and other stakeholders (other funders, staff, board members) to collaboratively develop a shared culture change goal and conduct a mental model analysis process?

• How might your grantmaking strategy evolve based on the outcomes of a narrative system design process involving your grantees, staff, and board?

FOR FIELD PRACTITIONERS

• Are you already using a narrative systems design and activation process in your cultural strategy work? If so, what more do you need to activate this work at scale?

• What intrigues you about this particular narrative system framework? What confuses you?

• For content creators, what would you still need to know in order to translate components of a narrative system into artistic fuel for story creation?

• What would it take for you to be able to collaborate in a cross-sector narrative network to activate a narrative system at mass audience scale? What groundwork would be required?

• How might this exploration of narrative systems theory help you advance or contradict your thinking about narrative change?
Appendix

FIELD & FUNDER CONTRIBUTORS

*From Stories to Systems* was written as a call-and-response to the narrative system theory and framework developed by Pop Culture Collaborative Senior Fellow Ryan Senser with Eleanor Morison and our community of over 300 grantees, senior fellows, staff, and Managing Partners over a two-year period beginning in January 2018. We are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed to this process:

**POP CULTURE COLLABORATIVE STAFF**
Bridgit Antoinette Evans, Tracy Van Slyke, Marisol Ramos, Katrina Olson, Daria Segalini

**SENIOR FELLOW FOR NARRATIVE STRATEGY**
Ryan Senser with research partner Eleanor Morison

**NARRATIVE SYSTEM DESIGN RETREAT | NEW YORK CITY - MARCH 2018**
Alex Beech, Betsy Richards, Eric Ward, Janaya Khan, Jason Rzepka, Maurício Mota, Maytha Alhassen, Nayantara Sen, Saket Soni, Shawn Taylor, Tracy Sturdivant

**ENTERTAIN CHANGE | LOS ANGELES – JUNE 2018**

**NARRATIVE WORKING GROUP | NEW YORK CITY – NOVEMBER 2018**
Ishita Srivastava, Kristina Apgar, Luis Castro, Michael Ahn, Nikki Marron, Zaheer Ali

**NARRATIVE WORKING GROUP | LOS ANGELES – DECEMBER 2018**
Jeff Yang, Lawrence Carter-Long, Maha Chehlaoui, Margari Hill, Maytha Alhassen, Mahyad Tousi, Sameer Gardezi
NARRATIVE SYSTEM VIRTUAL TOWNHALL | VIA ZOOM – DECEMBER 2018

FANDOM + IMMERSIVE STORYWORLD GENIUS BANK | OAKLAND – DECEMBER 2018
Aisha Shillingford, Alice Wong, Calvin Williams, Catrina Dennis, Cayden Mak, Eitan Manhoff, Elana Levin, Jeff Yang, Keith Chow, Ivan Askwith, Mikhail Tara Garver, Shawn Taylor, Terry Marshall, Thaddeus Howze

ARTISTS ADVANCING CULTURAL CHANGE RETREAT | NEW YORK CITY – APRIL 2020
Alex Beech, Britt Julious, Camila Concepcion, Catherine Coray, Chike Okonkwo, Deja Harrell, Emily Welsch, Irene Lazaridis, Julio Salgado, Karan Sunil, Katherine Heaney, Lameeece Issaq, Maha Chehlaoui, Megan Patterson, Mike Mosallam, Mikhail Tara Garver, Reshmi Hazra Rustebakke, Stephanie Jeter, Vincent Martell, Yennie Lee