**Scenarios as the Narrative Past and Future**

Lee Roy Beach

University of Arizona

Schoemaker’s article addresses the link between the past and the future, the former as the domain of historians and the latter as the domain of futurists, including scenario planners. He quotes Santayana’s “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”, which suggests that understanding the past can aid in anticipation of recurrences, specifically painful recurrences. Perhaps equally apt is Shakespeare’s “What’s past is prologue”, which suggests that understanding the past can aid in understanding the unique present and unique future, not just recurrences. It is this second view that I would like to examine.

Strictly speaking, the present is but a moment and the past and future do not exist. All we actually have is artifacts of the past and expectations about the future. Artifacts are memories possessed by individuals who experienced the past when it was the present and records of that past that they or others retained. Both kinds of artifacts can be used to create stories about the past that, in some sense, revive it and keep it alive. That is, stories that preserve versions of the past that can be examined in the present. And, imagining where the stories’ thrust may lead, extends it into the future.

The view of narrative cognition that I will briefly outline in a moment, posits that for each of us as individuals, the present, which our brain creates by briefly buffering ongoing immediate experience, is occupied by a story about the past, based on artifacts, primarily memories, and a future, based on imagining where the story’s thrust, its story line, might lead. The story is not *about* our reality, we do not consciously create it, it *is* our reality, our understanding of what is happening, why, and what it implies for the future. Given the importance of this story, let us take a moment to consider its nature.

Formally, a story is called a *narrative*; a sequence of events ordered by time and causality. Philosophers may not be sure that time is real and physicists may not be sure the world is deterministic, but humans and other creatures behave as though both are true. We operate as though everything that happens has been caused by something that happened previously and will be the cause of something that happens subsequently. As a result, cognitively, our narrative is a description of how the past caused the present and what this means for the future. That is, our narrative has a trajectory (a causal thrust, a story line) that extends from the past, through the present, and into the future. The different segments of this trajectory can be considered individually (memory, perception, expectations) but all three are necessary for properly describing our understanding of our ongoing experience.

A narrative’s trajectory is determined by the chain of causal links between its temporally ordered constituent events, links that have direction and strength. Direction means that occurrence of an event influences the occurrence of a subsequent event (X→Y). Strength is how directly that influence is exerted (i.e., X→Y *versus* X→G→K→ ... →Y), but the more direct they are the stronger they are. The stronger the links within the chain that forms the narrative’s trajectory, the more coherent the narrative is. The more coherent it is, the more it makes sense. And the more it makes sense, the more plausible (believable) it is.

It is easy to understand narratives as chronicles of past and present experience, because the events in them have happened or are happening. It is more difficult to understand them in regard to the future, because the future has yet to happen. It is here that time and causality are key because they provide predictability. If X causes Y, then, if X is occurring now, the future occurrence of Y is implied—is expected. At the moment that X is occurring, Y is merely a causal implication because it has not yet happened, but, depending upon the strength of the causal link between X and Y, it is the best prediction of the future—the coherent extension of the narrative’s trajectory.

This description of narrative is as applicable to literature, movies, TV, or any form of storytelling as it is to how we think about our own lives. The difference is that the former are recreational uses of the brain’s remarkable ability to structure events narratively and, coupled with language, to communicate that structure to ourselves and others. As important as communication is, the more important use of this ability is to predict the future. This is because prediction allows us to identify potential threats before they happen, which allows us to take action to prevent them from happening or to limit their damage. Of course, not all threats are mortal dangers; anticipated pain or other discomfort may be sufficient to warrant mitigating action. They do not even have to be physical; anticipated aggravation and hassle, potential loss of esteem, or the possible failure of opportunities to materialize or benefits to be realized are all threats that require mitigation. But, whatever their gravity, the most efficient way to handle threats is to anticipate them and deal with them before they cause damage.

This, of course is precisely what scenario planning is designed to do, to build upon its participants’ understanding about how the past shaped the present and what this implies for the future so that threats can be detected and mitigated and opportunities can be identified and exploited. But, there is a problem; no matter how enlightened these participants may be, their individual expectations about the future are limited to the implications of their individual understandings of the past and present. While, in the normal course of moment to moment living, this narrow view of the future is sufficient, in the longer term, it can itself be a threat because it does not anticipate events that lie outside its narrow bounds.

Unanticipated events are called *surprises*. Painful surprises can be even more dangerous for organizations than for individuals because so many people can be harmed and because organizations are less agile than individuals in mobilizing to mitigate them; by definition, surprises are unprepared for. This means that organizations are particularly in need of insights about the future and its potential painful surprises. Scenario planning is designed to provide these insights by negotiating the differences among informed participants’ understandings in the context of what Schoemaker calls ‘disciplined imagination’. The goal, quite literally, is to get them to think outside the box—the box of their own narrow scenarios about the organization’s future.

In previous work, Schoemaker has focused on scenarios about the future. Now he is proposing the use of historian’s techniques to create scenarios about the past. As we saw earlier, the past is reconstructed from artifacts. Seldom are these artifacts complete; memories fade and become distorted and records are incomplete, corrupted, or unavailable. Ambiguity means it is not possible to differentiate a ‘true description’ of the past from alternative descriptions. But, the range can be narrowed by limiting the descriptions of interest to those that lead plausibly to the present, where each description implies (generates) a unique prediction of the future. The overall result of the exercise is an array of pasts converging on the present from which an array of implied futures emanates. Together, these arrays tell yet another story: ‘The members of this planning group are not certain about what happened in the past but they think the truth lies within this array of pasts. And, they are not certain about what will happen in the future but they think that, unless they or someone else does something to change it, it will turn out to lie within this array of futures.” But, of course, they intend to do something to change it; at least the threatening aspects of it. So, their proposed plan for moving the organization forward will contain contingencies and work-arounds that take their lack of certainty into account, allowing their actions to adapt to events as they unfold. The goal is to ensure that the organization does not encounter painful surprises. Failing that, the goal is to have readily available methods for mitigating the damage.