Case Study: Deconstructing a Screenplay with Yoric

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Overview

The basics of dramatic writing haven’t changed much in millennia. Students today still study the same basic story structure that Aristotle laid down in Poetics, and the process hasn’t meaningfully changed, either. The outputs themselves—novels, plays, screenplays—have always fallen squarely on the narrative end of the document type spectrum. Each one is unique and facilitates a single primary interaction: reading from beginning to end. In addition, the format and presentation are often indelibly tied to the meaning of the content itself, as how the speaker of a piece of dialogue must be printed and presented in the output for the reader to grasp the full meaning of the dialogue. The content layer and presentation layer of the story are one and the same.

But what if that weren’t the case? What would it look like to create an application that created a “smarter” narrative story document? Over this past summer, I worked as the UX/UI designer for Yoric, a new web application that does just that: it deconstructs a screenplay into a more transactional document. The goal of the system is to streamline and improve the writing and editing process. It does this by incorporating aspects of the writing process that previously happened outside of the word processor or screenwriting software, and supporting the flexible interactions necessary during the editing phase. By combining these interactions, Yoric can give writers more information about their story itself, above and beyond the words on the page.

What Is Being Organized?

At its most basic level, the resources that Yoric organizes are the main elements of dramatic writing: characters, content (dialogue, description, action, etc.), and locations where the story takes place. These are all fundamental to the writing process, and are considered “diegetic” story elements (they relate to the story itself and are part of the story world). These are the who, what, and where of any story. Because writing is an ongoing process, Yoric is designed to manage this collection of story resources on an ongoing basis, as resources are constantly being created, removed, and modified. The resources are stored in a database, which is reflected in the web app.

In addition, Yoric also organizes non-diegetic elements, those that are not part of the actual story itself. In a sense, these are the how and why parts of the writing process. These elements are the screen or editorial direction (e.g. telling a director how to film the scene), the division of the story into acts or scenes, and the mapping of emotional beats (i.e. whether the audience should feel elated or depressed after watching a certain scene). Finally, Yoric organizes and presents data about all of these elements and how frequently those elements appear in the story.

The web application itself is also organized to provide specific interactions during specific stages in the writing process. Yoric has four main navigational areas, each with a different interface and functionality: Beat View, Icon Script View, Universe, and Builder.

1 Available at www.yoric.co.
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**Figure 1, Beat View**

Beat View serves as an abstract outline of the entire story. In this interface, writers assign a short description to the beat, determine the type of beat (from 9 pre-defined categories), and assign the emotional resolution for the audience at the end of the beat. Many writers currently use index cards for a similar purpose. With Yoric, these index cards then become the skeleton for the full script, which can be written granularly in Icon Script View. Beat View thus provides a brief visual overview of the entire story. Beats can be rearranged by dragging and dropping. Clicking on one reveals the edit panel at the lower right of screen, allowing for editing of beat type, resolution, and title.
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Figure 2.1, Icon Script View (Collapsed Beats)
Icon Script View is the most granular of all the interfaces of Yoric. It is here that actual dialogue is written, that characters are created, and that the plot of the story happens. Whatever outline was created in Beat View carries over to this view, and users can toggle between the two views. Each beat can be expanded for editing, or collapses for skimming through the entire script. As writers add new content to each beat, they classify that content as one of the six types, or as one of the three non-diegetic types (camera direction, editorial direction, or special effects). They also assign each content block within a beat to a particular location, which appears on the right-hand side of the interface. This allows writers to skim through the story and see visually where story locations change within the script.

See Figure 2.2, below, for a view of Icon Script with the first beat expanded and all content blocks within it visible.
Figure 2.2, Icon Script View (First Beat Expanded)
Figure 3, Universe

Universe provides immediate data feedback to the writer. Does one character overpower the entire script? See just how much here. Is your script the right amount of dialogue, or do you have too much talk and not enough action? Universe allows writers to see trends within their writing, something that is only possible through the organization scheme of Yoric.
Figure 4, Builder (Location Map)

Within Builder, writers can view a visual “map” of the story locations. Yoric creates this map through the use of inclusion relationships as writers add story locations (information on “parent” and “child” relationships populate it). Writers can create a story world up to six levels deep. These locations are reflected in Icon Script View, but can only be edited here, in the location map. Users can create new locations from here, and edit existing ones by dragging and dropping into a new inclusion relationship.
**Why Is It Being Organized?**

Yoric organizes story content so that a single story can later be exported into multiple production-ready formats—the main benefit of a more transactional document type. For instance, a writer could write a complete story in Yoric, and then choose to export it as a screenplay and later on as a graphic novel (by adding images). By organizing content “on the way in,” writers can more easily translate their story content into other formats later on, “on the way out.” Because the story is already written, the scale of export types can be increased without an increase in the scope of writing that needs to be done. This balance of scope versus scale is increasingly important in an entertainment world that relies on sequels and ancillary marketing. A single story could be scaled into many more formats than can be done when a story is contained completely on the narrative end of the document type spectrum. This will save the studios time and money, because they have typically been the ones organizing story content as they prep for production.

In addition, Yoric organizes story resources to allow writers to look deeper into their content, characters, and dramatic arc. The goal is to facilitate the writing of better content—content that is clear, organized, and purposeful. This can be achieved through some of the tools that Yoric provides, most notably with Beat View (see Figure 1).

**How Much Is It Being Organized?**

Screenplays have some surprisingly complex elements and dependencies, and Yoric handles them at differing levels of granularity, with each level supporting a different interaction.

Yoric divides diegetic story content into six types (dialogue, description, action, thought, sound, and setting). Groups of these content elements comprise an emotional “beat.” Beats are organized into nine types (based on a controlled vocabulary) and three directions (whether they intend a positive, neutral, or negative audience response). Groups of beats are organized into Acts and Scenes. Characters are a separate database element. Story locations are also separate elements, and are organized into a hierarchy of inclusion relationships up to six levels deep. Each piece of diegetic content is unique from all others, and can only occupy one content type and one location. In the non-diegetic space, stage and editorial directions are divided into three types.

Finally, data about the content is also organized by frequency. Writers can see the frequency that different characters occur in the story, the frequency of different content types (e.g. dialogue versus thought), or the frequency of each type of emotional beat.

**When Is It Being Organized?**

Organizing in Yoric happens on both the way in and the way out, by different agents. All of the content and story information will be organized during the writing process, and interactions allow for constant reorganization as well. Writers can choose to organize less at the outset and plan to come back at the end, but they gain more flexibility and data by organizing it stringently from the beginning of their process. On the way out, the software itself organizes all of the database elements into whichever visual format has been chosen at the time of export (whether that’s a screenplay, graphic novel, or another format).
How (Or by Whom) Is It Being Organized?

All of the potential users of the system will be organizing the content, but at different times and for different purposes. The writer organizes the content as they write, aiming to get their story across in a way that connects with an audience. Alternatively, at many studios a screenwriter's assistant might go back through and organize content at the end of the writing process but before production begins. Studio executives may reorganize content during the development phase of pre-production. Production companies will take information from Yoric and rearrange it into a format applicable to production, where having granular data on characters, locations, props and more will be a major time saver.

Other Considerations

The conversion of a piece of creative writing into a more transactional, database-driven document isn’t without its pitfalls. Organizing information on the way in can be time-consuming and difficult, and some writers may feel it hinders their creative process. Thus, Yoric is a great example of the tradeoffs inherent in any organizing system. Are the people reaping the benefits the same people who will have to do the work of organizing? We believe that writers who are creating massive story universes (say, another *Harry Potter* or *Game of Thrones*) will find that keeping characters, locations, and storylines coherent and organized, and providing a way for writers to easily reference that information, will prove to be more valuable than the extra work it takes to classify content and then type it, instead of just typing it in. We just released the first version of Yoric this fall, so time will tell if we are correct.