

The VeloCity Project: Turning Fact into Fiction

Simon ROWE

INTRODUCTION

News stories remain a useful tool for teaching ESL students to understand newspeak, which in turn helps them to ‘unlock’ the meaning of the English language media. Yet what good is this meaning if the implications of the reports go unrecognised? Five years of teaching media English workshops at university level has revealed a general uneasiness among students to engage in discussion of the ‘big issues’ of the day, and may be ascribed to an increasingly inward-looking (*uchimuki*) nature of Japanese youth (Burgess, 2013).

Also contributing is most certainly a lack of ‘good news’ stories in the media. Following another year of environmental catastrophes (the Mount Ontake eruption, the ongoing TEPCO debacle), towering national debt, territorial disputes with China and the enactment of new ‘secrecy’ laws by the Japanese Government, the old adage that “no news is good news” continues to ring true.

This realisation presented me with a research question: how can ‘big, bad and boring’ news stories be transformed into an exciting and dynamic learning experience for an 18-25 year-old readership? The answer is the VeloCity Project, a concept developed by this author.

Overview of the VeloCity Project

VeloCity is a 15,000-word work of micro-fiction designed to be accessed online and read easily by students of intermediate English language ability. It seeks to stimulate discussion by taking the issues of the day and weaving them into an ‘apocalyptic fairy tale’ set 50 years in the future. The title, *VeloCity*, derives from the French word “vélo” meaning bicycle and “city” which together imply speed or rapid movement.

Viewed under a lens of narrative theory, this story seeks to help younger readers “make sense of the world” (Arnold, 2013) in the same way that folk stories and fairytales have done down the centuries. Defined, narrative theory is a

“basic human strategy for coming to terms with fundamental elements of our experience, such as time, process, and change.” (Ohio State University, Project Narrative, n.d.). It also takes into account the ‘understandability’ of stories across cultures (Phelan, Rabinowitz, & Warhol, 2012) which has been useful to this writer in tailoring *VeloCity* to a Japanese readership.

University-aged ESL students, however, are unlikely to bother with such theoretical perspectives; more attractive to them is a simple, entertaining story with intriguing characters and themes that resonate. *VeloCity* is a classic ‘underdog’ story infused with themes of heroism, good vs. evil, love, betrayal and a search for identity in a mismanaged and hostile future world. Defined by Tobias (1993) in his book *20 Master Plots and How to Build Them*, it is a story where “the protagonist is at a disadvantage and is faced with overwhelming odds.” This presents a scenario not unfamiliar to youth who are knowledgeable about, or who have experienced firsthand, the difficulties faced by returnee children (*kikokushijo*), ‘nerds’ (*otaku*), withdrawn youth (*hikikomori*) and NEETs (not in education, employment or training) (Kingston, 2012) in modern Japanese society.

Story synopsis:

The year is 2050 and Japan is crushed by debt. The yen is history and the US dollar is the official currency. Osaka, the nation's fourth largest city, is a bankrupted mess. Electric cars and high oil prices are beyond the reach of most, and public transport is overcrowded and no longer runs on time. Bicycles have returned to the streets.

Amidst this chaos rises a young, ambitious criminal named Bochan Baba. His White Tiger gang have fingers in every pie across the city: extortion, drug running, prostitution, gambling and most recently, the wholesale thievery and export to southeast Asia of bicycles. Overworked and underpaid, the Osaka police are powerless to stop them. Safe from this scourge is a man-made island off the coast of Osaka called VeloCity.

Connected by an umbilical chord of rail links and taxi ferries, VeloCity is a social experiment—a carless city where its inhabitants get about by bicycle or pedicab. In the summer of 2050, however, VeloCity is eclipsed by a dark cloud: the White Tiger gang arrives to begin operations. What they haven't bargained on is a lowly Brazilian-Japanese mechanical designer named Axyl Gris and his

The VeloCity Project: Turning Fact into Fiction

pedicab girlfriend, Azusa. With the help of the mysterious Noodle Hawker, they plot to mobilise the residents of VeloCity and using wit, courage and mechanical know-how, send the thieves packing.

Simplicity is vital to readability. Short chapters run in two columns onto a parchment-style background with each chapter carrying a single theme that advances the plot. Chapter one, for instance, sets up the story; chapter two transports the reader to VeloCity; three introduces us to the hero, Axyl Gris and so forth.

How it works:

Of the proposed 15,000-word story, one third is currently accessible by cell phone, tablet or personal computer at www.mightytales.net. Social media applications such Facebook, Reddit and Twitter serve as feeders, alerting readers to new installments which can be read sequentially as they are published, or spatially, allowing the reader to move back and forth by clicking on the website's toolbar tabs. *VeloCity* is designed to be read quickly, then discussed, speculated on, even added to, by small groups of students within a 90-minute class.

VeloCity poses many currently relevant questions such as: will Japan resemble the one in the story? Will political ineptitude widen the gap dividing rich from poor? Will there be another a Great Hanshin earthquake? Is there a viable alternative to nuclear energy? What will China's influence be a half-century from now? Studied concurrently with current news reports, *VeloCity* encourages students to think about the most pressing issues facing Japan and to consider the possible outcomes of these in the future. Students are also encouraged to contribute to the story's plot development through creative writing tasks with the best ideas voted on by the class. In this way the story grows organically, extending beyond the planned 15,000 word limit.

Why micro fiction?

Renshaw (1998) in her *The Essentials of Micro-Fiction* says, "micro fiction, by nature, is defiant. It defies length, boundaries, and expectations." While this presents a formidable challenge to the writer, it is particularly well-suited to ESL learners in Japan. Micro-fiction resembles several popular Japanese literary forms in terms of its format and linguistic simplicity, such as haiku poetry, traditional

folk stories and *keitai shosetsu*, or cell phone novels, which are characterised by diary-like narratives (Onishi, 2008). Just as haiku seeks to achieve maximum meaning in minimum words, this writer has sought to curb the use of adjectives and adverbs to maximise the imaginative freedom of its readers. The challenge lies in writing a highly condensed and compact narrative form using “short sentences, simple, common concrete words, an active voice and positive language” (Cameron, n.d.).

Matt Stewart’s *The French Revolution*, the story of a dysfunctional family in San Francisco, was originally published on Twitter as an experiment (as cited in Beasley, 2013). While the 160-character restriction (per “tweet” or message) does not allow for the publishing of entire chapters of *VeloCity*, it does serve as a useful ‘marketing’ tool for alerting readers to new installments.

CONCLUSION

In his online presentation *Writing for the Web and Social Media*, Cameron (n.d.) asks, “Do you really have something to say?” *VeloCity* is a projection of what the world *could* be like in 2050 if human mismanagement of environmental and social issues and/or acts of God (tsunami, earthquakes) continues to plague Japan. As an ESL learning tool, it presents students with a ‘what if?’ scenario, seeking to stimulate their consciousness by encouraging them to reflect on the issues of the day and to ask themselves, “What implications do these have for the future of Japan?”

REFERENCES

- Arnold, J. (2013) *Theorising Cyberspace*. Swinburne Australia: Swinburne University Press.
- Burgess, C. (2013, May 21) Ambivalent Japan turns on its ‘insular’ youth: System discourages overseas study but students get blame. *The Japan Times* (online). Retrieved from HYPERLINK “<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2013/05/21/issues/ambivalent-japan-turns-on-its-insular-youth/>” “<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2013/05/21/issues/ambivalent-japan-turns-on-its-insular-youth/> on ...
- Beasley, C. (2013). *Online Writing*. Swinburne, Australia: Swinburne University Press.

The VeloCity Project: Turning Fact into Fiction

- Cameron, A. (n.d.). Writing for the web and social media. Retrieved from https://ilearn.swin.edu.au/bbcswebdav/institution/lilydale_postgraduate_writing/LPW604/modules/6/documents/WritingForTheWeb.pdf
- Kingston, J. (2012) Exploring the pathologies of Japan's youth, *The Japan Times*.
- Kobayashi, I. (2012). Dragonfly haiku. Retrieved from <http://thedragonflywoman.com/2012/01/30/dragonfly-haiku/>
- Onishi, N. (2008. January 20th) Thumbs Race as Japan's Best Sellers Go Cellular. *The New York Times* (online). Retrieved from HYPERLINK "<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/world/asia/20japan.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>" "<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/world/asia/20japan.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>
- Phelan, J., Rabinowitz, P., and Warhol R., (2012), *Theory and Interpretation of Narrative*, The Ohio State University Press.
- Renshaw, C. (1998). The essentials of micro-fiction. Retrieved from <http://www.pifmagazine.com/1998/06/the-essentials-of-microfiction>
- Tobias, R. (1993). *20 master plots and how to build them*. Writer's Digest Books.
- Walsh, H. (n.d.) Online Writing (online). Accessed from HYPERLINK "https://ilearn.swin.edu.au/bbcswebdav/institution/lilydale_postgraduate_writing/LPW604/modules/6/documents/SwinburneOnlineWriting.pdf" "https://ilearn.swin.edu.au/bbcswebdav/institution/lilydale_postgraduate_writing/LPW604/modules/6/documents/SwinburneOnlineWriting.pdf on

The VeloCity Project: Turning Fact into Fiction

Simon ROWE

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the use of micro-fiction as a learning tool for ESL students. It posits that narrative theory, when applied to storytelling, can complement the study of news media stories by encouraging students to think creatively and critically about the issues of the day. The VeloCity Project aims to achieve this through an original narrative which weaves fact with fiction to create a classic 'what if' scenario in future Japan. Further, it seeks to stimulate discussion about present-day societal concerns and encourage reflective thought on these concerns projected into the future. Stylised on the simple, evocative forms of haiku poetry and *keitai shosetsu*, cell phone novels, *VeloCity* is designed to be read using a variety of digital platforms, thus making it accessible to young ESL learners, the target audience of this project.