

Children's narratives when they play

Mick Conway

The role of narrative in play

- Children very often tell themselves (and others) stories as they play
- Can be anything from the initial play cue to the complete frame in which the play cycle happens
- Continuity and stability of narrative themes over hundreds (perhaps thousands) of years and across cultures and populations (Peter and Iona Opie etc)
- But nowadays major changes with the rise of mass media

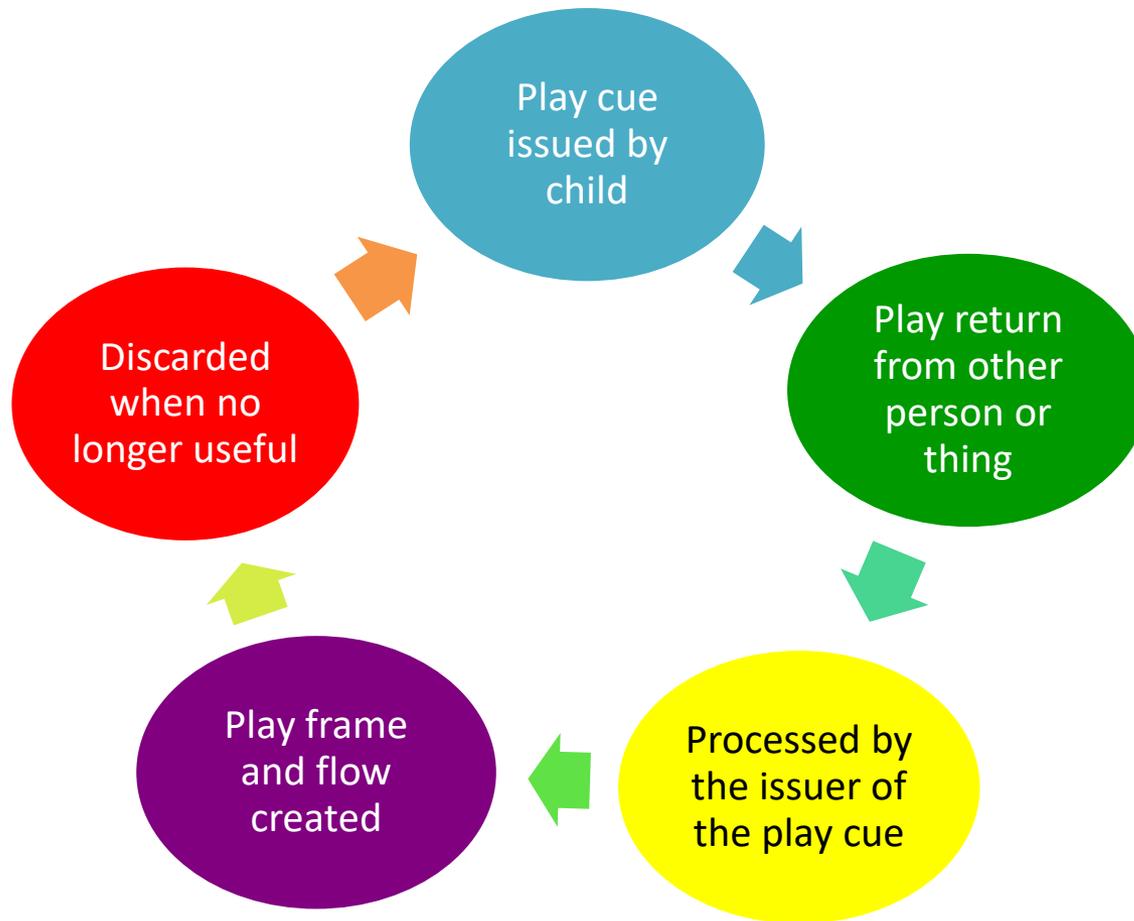
The role of narrative in play

- Children are born hard-wired with universal grammar (Unusually, most linguists from Chomsky to Pinker agree)
- Actual words used in whatever language (surface structure) link to universal meanings (deep structure)
- Social construction of reality and meaning
- Cyclical interactions between:
 - the teller of the narrative
 - the narrative and its objects
 - the receiver of the narrative

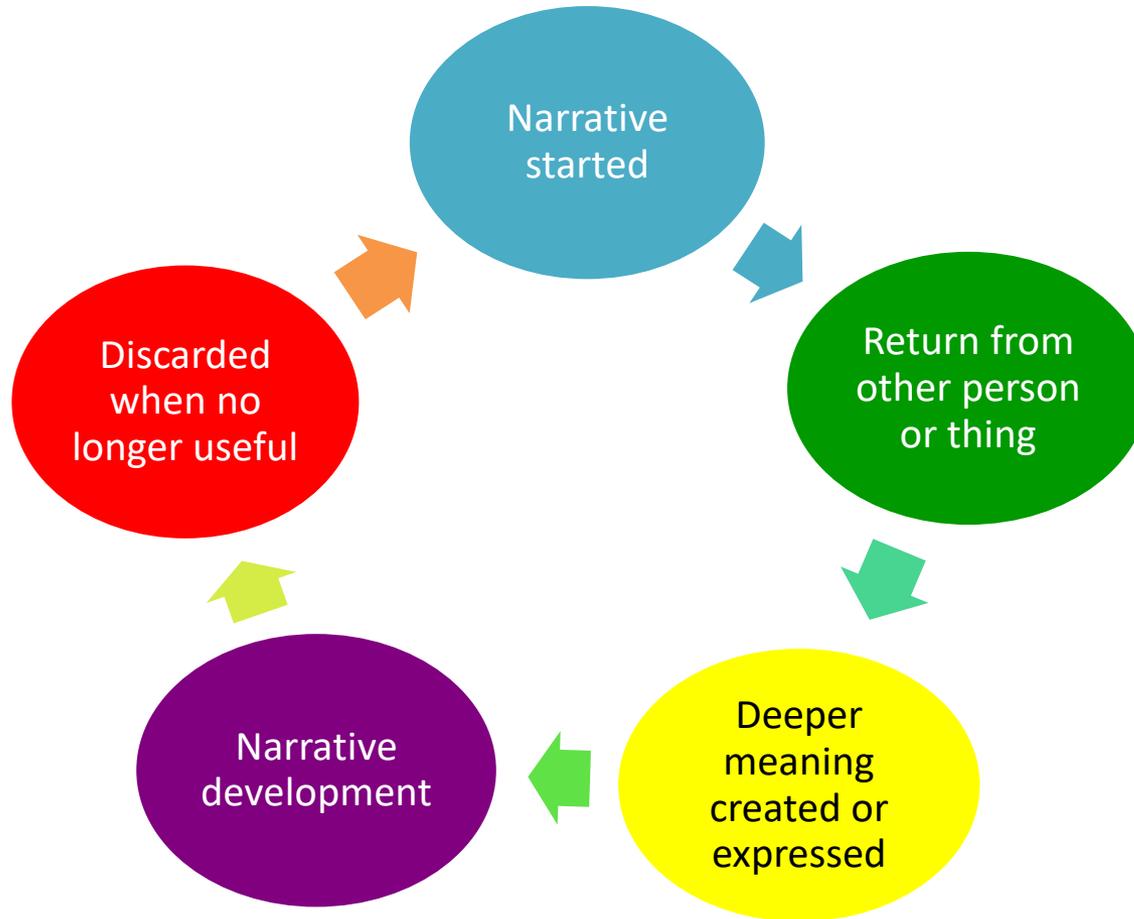
What science tells us

- Areas of the brain in children are continually being self-constructed
- Building neural networks within and between parts of the brain – left/right cortex, frontal/mid/rear areas
- There is no single ‘language centre’ as previously thought
- All parts work together all the time to build, recycle and renew themselves
- Amazingly complex self-regulating and learning systems

Play cycle as a positive feedback loop



Narrative as a play feedback loop



Marketisation of narrative

“Today’s more symbolically mobile children are sometimes more likely to be found in their own bedrooms or in front of a television set or at a home computer than in the streets or the playgrounds.

But they are also more directly exploitable by the marketplace, which has steadily developed them as a consumer resource over the past two decades.”

(Sutton-Smith, B. (1999). *Children's folklore: A source book*)

Marketisation of narrative

- British toy industry worth £3.87 billion annually
- Film-related merchandise value up 89% since 2013
- Star Wars toys sales £16.6 billion since 1977
- Frozen No1 toy licence in 2017, followed by Minions, Avengers, Jurassic World and Star Wars
- But...28.3% arts and crafts growth predicted as families turn away from “screen time”

(ReportBuyer: The UK Toys & Games Market 2017 – 2022)

The role of narrative in play

- Growth in complexity and depth as children grow
- Very young (age 2 – 3) mainly beginnings and endings “Once upon a time...happy ever after”
- Mixture of fantasy, dreams, real happenings but with a strong inner logic
- Later becomes re-telling or ‘inhabiting’ folk tales, fairy stories, TV/film scenarios
- Very little literature on narrative in play apart from Sutton-Smith

Sabi's tale

“When I was born the King **and** the Queen died and they had no children.

So King Arthur was just a little, little boy and wasn't a King yet.

There was a sword but nobody could get it out of the ground but he did it and that was how they knew he was the king.

He had a bit of help from a wizard but I can't remember his name.”

Sabi's tale

- Sabi is about seven
- A recently arrived refugee from Sudan
- Throughout her tale she was acting out failing to, and finally successfully pulling the sword out of the ground, using a stick in the sandpit
- The surface structure of the King Arthur legend would have been completely new to her
- The deep structure – the archetypal narrative – would have been more familiar

Archetypal human narratives

- Journeys and quests with a return to a homeland or discovery of a new one
- Struggles to resolve moral and ethical dilemmas
- Life as an arc from birth through prime to death; but also as constant renewal
- Heroes and heroines becoming recognised, or overcoming evildoers or their own internal demons
- Mockery and satire – the emperor with no clothes
- Foundation myths with strong fantastical elements

Children's narratives

- Curiosity and questing (explorers, pirates etc)
- Making, breaking and changing rules
- Love of natural living forms, fascination with dead things
- Overcoming adversity, problem-solving, mastery
- Mockery and subversion of the adult world, role (and role reversal) play
- Co-creating stories, myths and rituals

THE LONELY BIRD

Molly told granddad a story.



"The bird was
in the tree.
All by itself,
and crying!"



All her friends flew away."

Granddad said "Oh no! Where have they
gone?"



Molly wasn't sure.
"Probably at work."
(Probably was
probably one of her

favourite words)

Granddad had a think. "Maybe we could phone them?"

Molly went to find her phone. "I can't find it granddad." She said. "Probably not there any more."



Granddad searched his pockets and suddenly found a magic secret bird phone.

Molly phoned the birds for a long time.

"The birds are all coming back now Granddad. Just in time. And happy ever after once upon a time!"

"The End!" said Molly, and that was the happy end of her story.



Molly's tale

- The narrative came out of nowhere as Molly and I were sitting side by side in her garden
- She was then two years old
- There is a logical plot structure of loss and redemption; emotional downs and ups; tension and plot devices; rhetorical flourishes (her favourite words and phrases); and a narrative arc ending satisfactorily
- “Happy ever after once upon a time. **The End!**”

Albi's tale.

“Ok. Right. This is before
the beginning of time.
Before **ANYTHING!**

And then there was a...a...
a...**TURTLE! A GIANT
SABRE-TOOTHED** turtle
that ruled the world.

Until it met me and it
went completely
EXTINCT!

(Squashes it flat)

And now it's just back in
the earth again until the
explorers find its bones.”



Evie's tale.

“This is the Ancient Owl. It is the wisest bird in the world. It sits on a branch and waits for people to ask it questions, but they have to give it a present.

This mud man gave the owl a flower from his hat but it wouldn't answer his question!

(Giggles hysterically)

And he was **SO** annoyed!
And...he...he...he cut his own nose off!”



Albi and Evie's tales

- Both came out of a mud making and modelling session at the same table on the same day, but hours apart
- Both emerged spontaneously without external prompts
- Both have mythical elements
- And both have an element of ridicule (Evie) or reversal in power roles (Albi)

The Ice Cream Wolf

Molly: “As if by magic I’ve turned you into an ice cream. And eating you all up. Rwarr! RWAARRR! **RWARRRR!!**”

Me: “Oh no – that sounds a bit like a wolf?”

Molly: “An Ice Cream Wolf! It only comes out at night!”

Later we drew the wolf and Molly coloured it in “Black. **Black!** **BLACK!!** And now I’m giving it legs...and...and...**hands.**”

Me, trembling: “Hands? Wolves don’t have hands do they?”

Molly, pityingly: “You **need** hands to eat ice cream. Now ssshhh granddad I’m going over there to scare Sue.”

After five minutes of screams from Sue, Molly came back and with grim satisfaction announced “It worked!”

The Ice Cream Wolf



Brandon's tale

He made this construction from lollipop sticks, elastic bands and string.

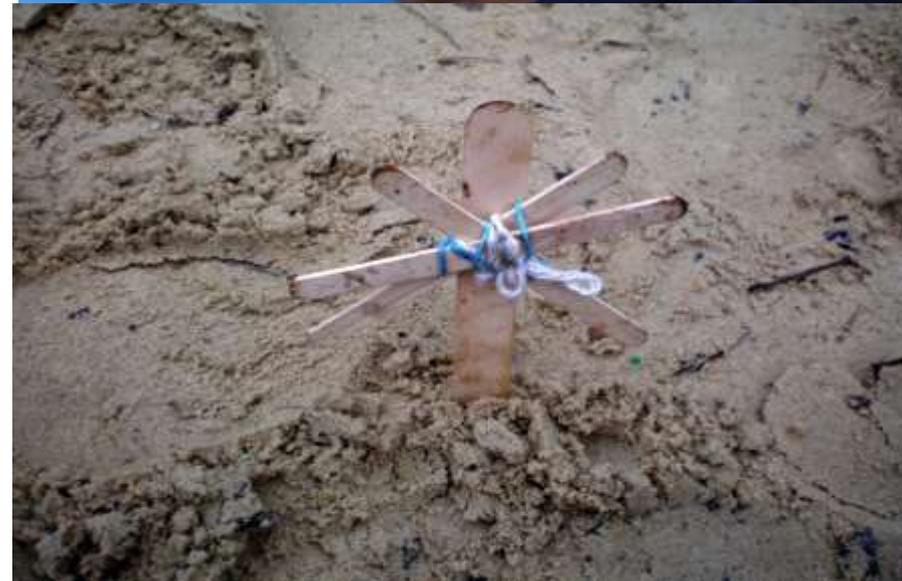
"This is my Flicker."

Me: "So what does it do?"

"It flies! Like a fairy flying in the sun!"

(Hours later)

"It needs to be a flower for a bit. It's charging in the sand. It doesn't need electricity, it can charge itself ANYWHERE in the earth! And that is how it gets its power."



Play flow

Nine-year-old: “Ok. We got an apple, a pear, an orange, a banana and - what’s this thing – is it a pepper? Look, they can all float in the water. We need to find out which can go the fastest? And they all have to get to the end!”

Fifteen-year-old: “I’m quite enjoying this for some reason!”



Play flow

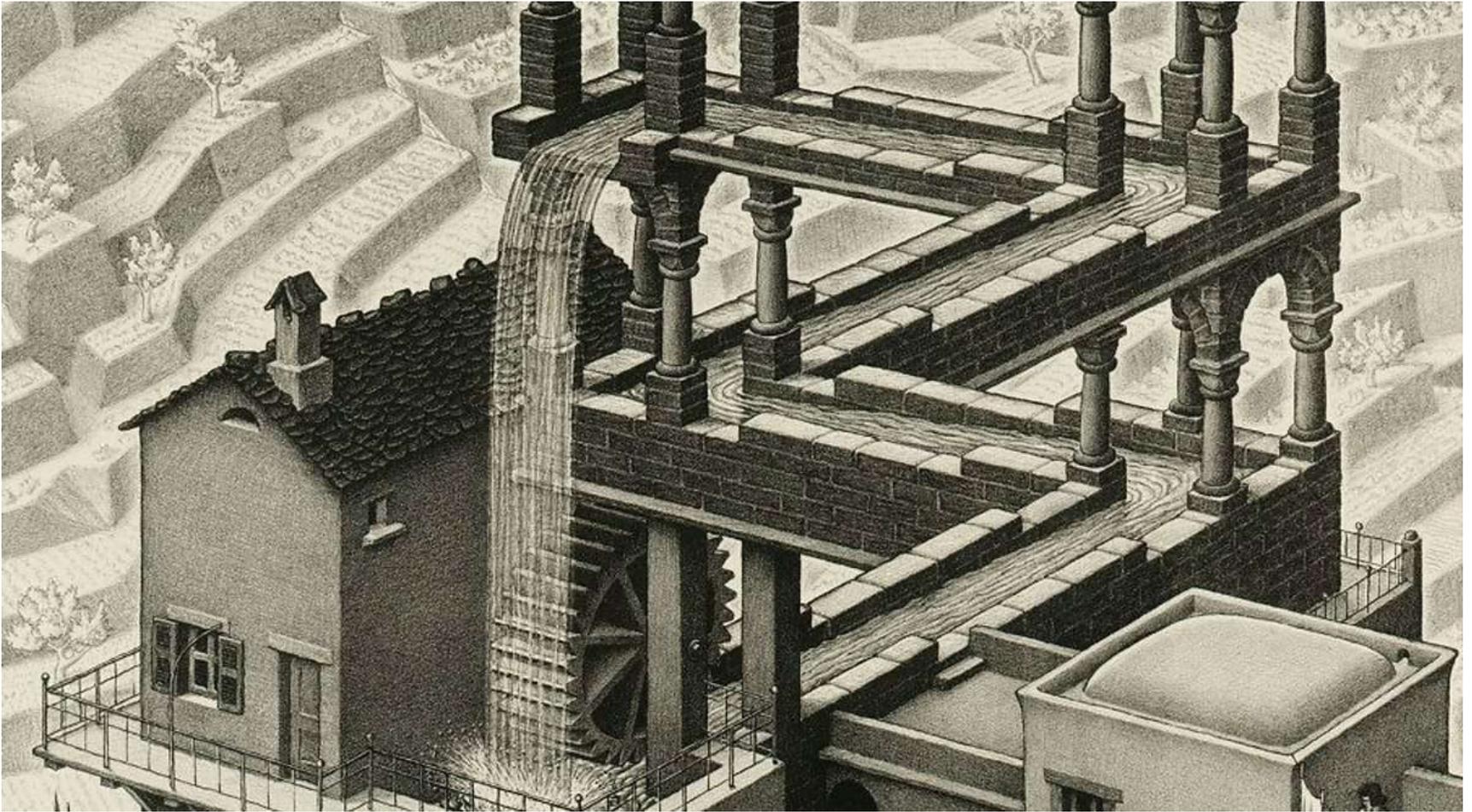
“We have to save the water ‘cos there isn’t enough in the world.

You ones at the pump have to obey our order not to pump until we save the water and get it **ALL** back to the bucket!

Can we make it a thing that makes the water just go round and round and round?”



Working on it...



Play flow

- Here the narrative is prompted by the loose parts – bits of half-pipe, tripods and plastic fruit in the sand pit
- The later addition of a crude pump made from plastic pipe and a wooden piston – which was quite inefficient - prompted a water conservation narrative
- And MC Escher played with exactly the same final idea of “impossible objects”

Annie and the tree

- A film by Phil Waters, which first alerted me to the importance of narrative in play
- Using a GoPro camera on a chest harness worn by Annie
- An excellent insight into the role of narrative in play – listen carefully to Annie as she tells herself the story of how she is making the tree better
- <https://vimeo.com/88200898>

Narrative(s) in play can:

- Act as a play cue
- Frame part or all of the play cycle
- Deepen meanings and communication
- Trigger experimentation
- Co-create and enrich the play environment
- **So please listen for them!**