

Post

M2M General



A Narrative Architecture for The Internet of Things

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The Internet of Things turns the physical world into the new media channel. Even something as seemingly data-driven as traffic patterns, the weather or my pulse rate when I jog are the source of stories: “traffic was a disaster today”, “I hit a wall today on my run”, or “boy it's cold/hot/humid out”.

We think of IoT and M2M as primarily data-driven. But even data is shaped by the stories we tell about it: how we socialize a [connected city](#), what we tell our friends about our [Nest thermostat](#), or how we make sense of the [quantified self](#).

The first challenge is to get everything connected and to figure out how to manage all the information that a billion devices will create. But just like the cable TV industry didn't stop at the invention of the cable box and just as the Web didn't end once we got broadband into people's homes, IoT won't be complete just because we've launched a billion nodes onto the network.

We'll need a new language to help people make sense of their place in a connected world. This language will consist of interfaces, intuitive dashboards, and semantically-relevant search tools.

But it will also consist of something we call a **narrative architecture** the conventions and tools that will allow people to consume and create stories. Like any new media channel, those conventions might borrow from what came before (just like TV borrowed from live theatre) but we'll soon discover the unique affordances of the technology and start to create something entirely new.

The Place of Story on the Internet of Things

You go for a run with your smart watch tracking your pulse. You come home and the thermostat senses you've arrived and adjusts the temperature. You drive to the office and your IoT-enabled dashboard directs you around a traffic jam.



These moments are almost ambient in their elegance: you don't need to DO very much to enjoy their benefits, and you might not even be consciously aware of what happened: your living room just feels more comfortable and you got to work a few minutes earlier.

But even at the simplest level of socializing IoT adoption, each of these examples has an opportunity for story: what you tell your co-workers when you arrive early, what you tell your running partner about how far you jogged on the weekend, or what you tell your neighbor about how much electricity you've saved.

In fact, one of the central challenges of IoT is that it can be mostly invisible: a connected city might have sensors that change the traffic lights or we might have a connected smoke alarm in our home. Neither is visible to us unless there's a malfunction or a fire.

And yet their very invisibility makes it hard to articulate their value: the data might show that sensors have made traffic more efficient, but if everyone's still complaining about gridlock then its work is only half done.

Where Does The Story Go From Here?

We can create stories using the Internet of Things. We can create [toys that tell stories to our kids](#). A museum tour becomes a narrated adventure and a trip to the grocery becomes the Food Network.

But the more intriguing challenge is to start with the devices and build narrative from there: to layer the convention of storytelling onto the framework of the Internet of Things:

- How do you add narrative elements to your smart watch?
- How does a store "talk" to you as you walk through the aisles?
- How do you add a sense of agency and narrative tension to your morning jog?
- How do you tell stories about energy and sustainability and collective effort in a connected city?
- How do you use foreshadowing, climax, and denouement to help users understand where they are on a particular journey through a connected experience?
- How do we use history, legacy, myth and heroes as tools in the armament of connected experiences?

Where Technology Meets Narrative

The struggle to create new conventions for narrative and storytelling are the struggles of every new media: whether TV shaking off the conventions of the theatre stage, or video games throwing off the conventions of 'click and kill' in order to add emotional resonance and depth to the play experience.

I'd propose that the true revolutions of IoT will come at the intersection of the hardware and hard data and the software and user experiences: where emotion meets functionality and where we suddenly find delight and awe in something as granular as brushing our teeth.



But to get there, IoT and M2M needs to continue the dialogue between the different engineers: the hardware engineers and the experience IMAGINEERS, the data specialists and the storytellers.

Disneyworld might be powered by a ruthlessly intelligent information system, but it's also powered by what we know about narrative agency, wayfinding, treasure hunting, exploring, socializing, serendipity and surprise.

On the Internet of Things the world around us is the setting and the devices are characters along our journey.

We need to learn to create ambiguity, allow emergent play, identify heroes and villains, create conventions for foreshadowing and plot twists and then give our users a pencil and a piece of paper and let them write their own adventures.

The world is the new channel. And it's bigger than TV. From the most banal sounding sensor to a fully connected home, each is a platform for telling stories about our journeys through a world made, perhaps, a little bit better because we're moving towards a narrative of a richer and more connected world.



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