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Narrative as Possibility Space: A Phasespace Custodianship Framework

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Abstract

This article introduces a descriptive framework for analyzing how narrative events alter the range of futures available within a story world. Drawing on the concept of phasespace from complex systems research, the paper proposes treating narrative as a dynamic configuration of possibilities rather than solely as a sequence of events or thematic structures. Within this perspective, actions performed by characters function as interventions that modify the structural conditions under which later events become possible.

The framework, termed phasespace custodianship, provides a vocabulary for describing these transformations and a computational apparatus for recording candidate interventions and their systemic effects across a narrative sequence. The method operates at a mesoscopic scale between close reading and corpus analysis, producing structured observations that support interpretive analysis without replacing it.

By making the distribution of constraints, agency, and systemic change more explicit, the framework offers a common descriptive layer through which different theoretical approaches—including for example feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial readings—may be related to the same narrative system. A subsequent paper will apply the apparatus to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" as a methodological demonstration of the framework in use.

Keywords: phasespace custodianship; narrative possibility space; computational literary studies; computational narratology; mesoscopic analysis; systemic intervention; interpretive analysis

Introduction

Narratives often produce the sense that the range of possible outcomes is tightening or loosening as events unfold. In some works the shift appears through visible action: a decision creates a new path or closes one that had seemed available. In others it develops through implication or hesitation, as when characters move within a field of partly articulated constraints. Readers experience these changes as pressure within the situation itself.

Narratologists have described this phenomenon in several ways. Studies of narrative tension and suspense explain how stories maintain attention by combining uncertainty about future developments with structured expectations about what might occur next (Sternberg 1978; Baroni 2007). Possible-worlds narratology treats fictional narratives as systems of potential states in which events progressively restrict or redirect the trajectories available within the story world (Ryan 1991; Doležel 1998).

Structural accounts of plot likewise describe narrative development as movement between configurations of relative stability and disruption, in which new events alter the conditions governing what can plausibly happen next (Todorov 1971; Abbott 2008). Across these traditions, narrative progression is understood not only as a sequence of events but also as a reconfiguration of the possibilities available within the fictional environment.

This article introduces a framework for describing those reconfigurations more systematically. It proposes that a narrative may be understood as a dynamic field of possibility in which actions alter the structural conditions under which later events become possible. Some interventions widen the range of available futures, while others narrow it. The result is a way of representing narrative as an evolving system of constraints, pressures, and transitions.

The framework is designed to support, rather than replace, existing interpretive approaches. A feminist reading may ask how agency and constraint are distributed across gendered roles; a Marxist reading may examine how material conditions

and economic pressures limit available trajectories; a post-colonial reading may analyze how authority and coercion shape the space of possible action. The phasespace perspective does not determine these interpretations. It provides a shared structural description through which they may be related to the same narrative system.

The conceptual basis for this approach draws on the notion of phase space in the study of dynamical systems. In that tradition, the state of a system corresponds to a position within a multidimensional space whose coordinates represent variables relevant to the system's behavior. Changes in those variables move the system through the space, producing a trajectory that describes its evolution over time (e.g. Poincaré 1892; Lorenz 1963). State-space representations have become a standard way of analyzing systems whose behavior emerges from the interaction of multiple constraints rather than from a single governing variable. Lorenz's analysis of atmospheric convection showed how three interacting variables can generate trajectories through a phase space associated with chaotic dynamics (Lorenz 1963).

Similar approaches appear in ecology, where interacting species populations are modeled as trajectories within coupled dynamical systems (May 1973), and in neuroscience, where population-level neural activity is represented as movement through high-dimensional state spaces (Churchland et al. 2012).

When this perspective is applied to narrative, successive events may be interpreted as altering the conditions under which future events remain possible within the story world. Narrative progression then becomes a trajectory through a structured landscape of possibility, shaped by barriers, basins of relative stability, and transitions across thresholds. The framework proposed here treats actions within the story as interventions that modify that landscape.

To name this perspective, I introduce the term phasespace custodianship. The term emphasizes that actions within a system do not simply produce outcomes; they maintain, redirect, restrict, or reopen the conditions under which different outcomes remain available. A computational apparatus supports the framework by identifying candidate interventions within a narrative and recording their estimated structural effects across the textual sequence.

The article proceeds in three stages. The first section introduces the conceptual foundations of the phasespace custodianship framework. The second situates the approach within computational literary analysis and clarifies its methodological position in relation to algorithmic criticism and corpus-scale analysis. The final section outlines the analytical apparatus that later empirical studies will apply to particular literary texts. The underlying idea may be visualized as a trajectory moving through a landscape of constraints and stability basins (Figure 1).

Conceptual Foundations: Phasespace and Possibility

The conceptual vocabulary developed in this article begins with an idea from the physical sciences, where phasespace refers to a representation of the states available to a system. Each point within the space corresponds to a particular configuration of relevant variables. As the system changes, its state traces a trajectory through that space.

The concept allows change to be described without granting explanatory priority to any single component of the system. Instead of focusing on the intention of an agent or the properties of a single object, phasespace directs attention toward the configuration of conditions that make different trajectories possible.

In practice the dimensional structure of such a space may be extremely complex. Many systems cannot be described through a small number of variables. But even when the exact geometry of the space remains unknown, the conceptual framework remains useful. It allows analysts to describe regions of stability, thresholds where trajectories change direction, and zones where small disturbances produce disproportionate effects.

An ecological example clarifies the point. Consider a lake that receives steadily increasing nutrient runoff from surrounding farmland. For a considerable period the ecosystem absorbs the disturbance. Water quality declines unevenly while the broader structure appears intact. Eventually the system crosses a threshold and shifts into a different ecological regime characterized by persistent algal blooms and depleted oxygen levels. The significance of the transition lies in the change in viable configurations available to the ecosystem. Returning the system to its earlier state becomes difficult once the shift has occurred.

Narrative systems can be approached in a similar way. Characters act within situations shaped by institutions, social relations, material constraints, and psychological dispositions. These elements together define the conditions under which events may occur. Pressure accumulates when those conditions restrict the range of viable trajectories.

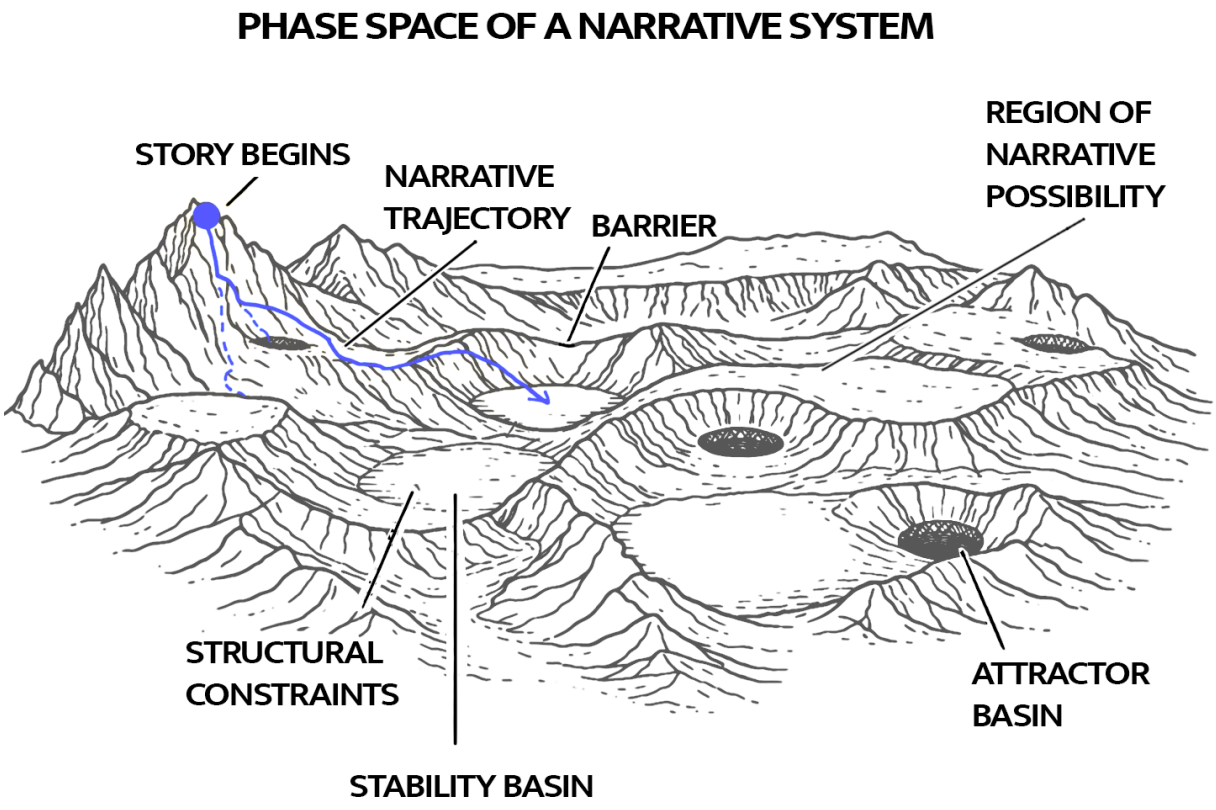


Figure 1. Narrative trajectory in a conceptual possibility space.

The landscape represents configurations of conditions within the story world. Basins indicate relatively stable narrative states, while ridges mark constraints that shape transitions between basins. Events redirect the trajectory by altering the structural conditions under which later developments remain possible.

Custodianship and the Maintenance of Possibility

The second term in the framework introduces the idea of custodianship. A custodian does not determine every outcome within a system. The role involves maintaining the conditions that allow meaningful activity to occur within the space.

A familiar example appears in the maintenance of a library. The custodian of the collection does not determine which book each reader will study. The work involves preserving the catalogue, maintaining the physical environment of the archive, and protecting access routes through which readers locate materials. Decisions about preservation policies still matter. The central responsibility concerns the conditions that allow future inquiry to remain possible.

Placed beside the concept of phasespace, custodianship describes an orientation toward complex systems in which attention centers on the maintenance of viable trajectories. The system does not attempt to calculate every possible path through the space. Instead it maintains the structural conditions under which multiple trajectories remain available.

This orientation differs from familiar models of intelligent behavior that emphasize optimization or control. Optimization assumes that a system searches among possible configurations in order to locate a preferred outcome defined by an objective function. Control systems monitor their state relative to a desired condition and apply corrective adjustments that maintain stability. A good example is the thermostat in your home.

These approaches function well when objectives can be specified clearly and when environmental conditions remain relatively stable. Difficulties appear in environments where the objective function may change or where stability cannot be defined relative to a single preferred state.

Ecological systems, technological infrastructures, and knowledge networks often display this property. Long-term viability in such environments depends less on locating an optimum than on preserving the capacity for adaptation as conditions change.

A technological example illustrates the difference. Early computer networks relied on centralized architectures in which communication passed through a small number of critical nodes. These arrangements functioned efficiently during normal operation, but the failure of one of those nodes could disable large portions of the system.

Later network designs adopted distributed architectures that allow traffic to reroute dynamically when components fail. From the perspective of optimization the distributed system appears less efficient. From the perspective of custodianship the redundancy protects the possibility of continued operation under a wider range of conditions.

Similar dynamics appear in research infrastructures. Fields that sustain methodological diversity often prove more resilient than those that converge rapidly on a single dominant technique. Competing approaches expose weaknesses in one another. Hybrid methods emerge that would not appear in a uniform methodological environment. Institutional arrangements that permit exploratory work support a richer field of intellectual development.

In each case the central concern involves maintaining the structural conditions under which future trajectories remain available. Systems that preserve redundancy, interoperability, and reversibility maintain a broader configuration space than systems that commit irrevocably to a single path.

Literature Review

Computational Criticism and the Analysis of Individual Texts

Digital humanities research relevant to the present framework has developed along several related lines: computational approaches that treat algorithms as instruments for interpretive exploration, large-scale corpus analysis that identifies statistical regularities across literary systems, and projects that model or visualize the internal dynamics of individual narratives. The present framework draws selectively from each of these traditions while addressing a specific problem: how changes within a story alter the range of futures that remain available within the story world.

One influential articulation of computational criticism appears in Stephen Ramsay's discussion of algorithmic criticism (Ramsay 2011). Ramsay proposed that computational procedures should be understood as mechanisms that transform texts in systematic ways. Once transformed, the text can be examined from a new vantage point. Interpretation remains the responsibility of the critic. The algorithm functions as a formalized interpretive gesture that produces conditions under which new questions may be asked. In this formulation, computation becomes an instrument for generating structured encounters with literary texts rather than a procedure for extracting definitive answers.

Related ideas about the relationship between computation and humanities scholarship appeared earlier in John Unsworth's formulation of "scholarly primitives," which described basic operations common across humanities research, including discovering, annotating, comparing, referring, sampling, illustrating, and representing (Unsworth 2000). From this perspective, computational tools support fundamental scholarly activities rather than replacing interpretive reasoning. Early experimental systems such as NORA (No One Reads Alone) and MONK (Metadata Offer New Knowledge) explored how machine-learning techniques could assist scholars in identifying patterns within literary texts while leaving interpretive judgment with the researcher. These projects demonstrated that computational methods could function as exploratory instruments within literary scholarship.

A related line of development appeared in the Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) project, directed by Ray Siemens and involving a large interdisciplinary collaboration investigating the affordances of digital text, experimental interfaces, and scholarly apparatus (Siemens et al. 2009). Rather than treating digital texts simply as new containers for familiar reading practices, INKE explored how textual materials might be reorganized through rich interfaces, dynamic representations, and new forms of scholarly interaction. Research within the project emphasized experimental interfaces and digital apparatus designed to support interpretive exploration of textual collections (Ruecker et al. 2014).

The interpretive orientation of such work is articulated clearly in Geoffrey Rockwell and Stéfan Sinclair's account of computer-assisted interpretation. In *Hermeneutica*, Rockwell and Sinclair argue that computational tools should be understood as instruments that expand the range of interpretive experimentation available to humanities scholars rather than as mechanisms that replace critical judgment (Rockwell and Sinclair 2016). The emphasis on exploratory interaction between scholar and instrument provides an important conceptual precedent for the present framework, which similarly treats computation as a means of making structural features of textual systems observable.

Alongside these interpretive traditions, digital humanities has also developed large-scale computational approaches to literary study. Franco Moretti's work on distant reading demonstrated how quantitative analysis of large textual corpora can reveal patterns in literary production that remain difficult to detect through conventional reading practices (Moretti 2005; Moretti 2013). Matthew Jockers extended this line of inquiry through macroanalysis, using computational techniques to examine patterns in narrative and style across extensive literary datasets (Jockers 2013). Work combining topic modeling with literary analysis has further explored how probabilistic models can identify recurring thematic structures within large textual collections (Blei 2012; Jockers and Mimno 2013). More recent methodological reflection has emphasized that such computational analyses reorganize the evidentiary landscape within which interpretation occurs rather than eliminating the need for interpretive explanation (Underwood 2019).

During the last decade, the field has increasingly reflected on the conceptual foundations of computational literary analysis itself. A growing body of work within what is now often termed Computational Literary Studies has examined how literary concepts are operationalized for computational analysis and how such operationalizations affect interpretation. Gius and Jacke (2022), for example, argue against viewing computational literary studies as a straightforward revival of structuralist approaches, emphasizing instead the exploratory and provisional character of computational modeling in literary scholarship. Pichler and Reiter (2022) similarly describe operationalization—the process of translating literary concepts into formal procedures—as a central activity within digital humanities research. Related studies have examined the instability of literary categories during annotation and modeling processes, demonstrating that computational workflows often reveal ambiguities already present within literary theory (Weimer et al. 2022).

The methodological diversity of the field has been documented and debated in a number of reflective collections, including *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, which examines competing assumptions about the goals and methods of digital humanities scholarship (Klein and Gold 2016). Discussions within this literature frequently address the relationship between large-scale computational analysis and the interpretive traditions of literary studies. One continuing concern involves the development of methods that retain the interpretive richness of individual works while introducing systematic forms of computational observation.

Several projects have approached this problem by developing computational representations of narrative structure within individual texts. Work on interpretive visualization in digital humanities has emphasized that graphical representations of data function as analytical constructs rather than neutral displays of information (Drucker 2014). Teresa Dobson and collaborators have explored interactive visualizations that represent plot dynamics in fiction, allowing scholars to examine patterns of narrative development through graphical interfaces (Dobson et al. 2011). Related work by Jennifer Roberts-Smith and collaborators on the Simulated Environment for Theatre (SET) models relationships among agents, actions, and performance conditions within dramatic texts, producing digital environments that allow scholars to explore the structural dynamics of theatrical works (Roberts-Smith et al. 2013).

Subsequent research has extended these efforts by systematizing visual and computational approaches to textual structure. Jänicke et al. (2017) survey the rapidly expanding field of visual text analysis, documenting a wide range of visualization techniques developed for literary and historical texts. Their review demonstrates that visual analysis has evolved into a substantial methodological domain within digital humanities, encompassing tools designed both for exploratory close reading and for large-scale textual analysis.

More recently, computational narratology has attempted to formalize narrative events and their relations more directly. Gius and Vauth (2022) propose an event-based model of plot that operationalizes narrativity and tellability in order to represent plot structures computationally. Their work treats narrative as a structured relation among events rather than simply a chronological sequence, allowing computational systems to examine how narrative incidents combine to produce recognizable plot structures.

The phasespace custodianship framework developed in this article builds upon these traditions while introducing a different descriptive emphasis. Earlier computational approaches have often focused on patterns within textual language, statistical regularities across large collections, or the formal modeling of narrative events. The present framework instead treats a narrative as a dynamic system in which events alter the structural conditions under which future events become possible. From this perspective, narrative actions function as interventions that modify the configuration of possibilities available within the story world. The analytical apparatus described in the following sections is designed to record such interventions and their structural effects across the unfolding sequence of events.

Methodological Position: A Mesoscopic Scale of Analysis

The framework proposed in this article operates at a scale that lies between close reading and large-scale corpus analysis. Digital humanities scholarship often describes these orientations as distinct methodological traditions. Close reading examines the internal structure of a single work. Corpus analysis investigates statistical tendencies across many texts. Each approach offers important insights, yet each leaves certain aspects of narrative structure difficult to observe.

The custodial framework addresses a different analytical scale. It treats an individual narrative as a dynamic system whose internal conditions evolve as events occur. The goal is not to generalize across hundreds of works and not to replace interpretive reading with automated classification. Instead the computational apparatus produces a structured observational record that complements traditional interpretation.

In this respect the apparatus resembles earlier exploratory environments such as the MONK project (Metadata Offer New Knowledge), which treated computational procedures as instruments that assist scholarly observation rather than mechanisms that replace interpretive judgment.

At this scale, computation functions as a descriptive instrument. The apparatus records candidate interventions within the narrative and estimates their systemic effects. These observations allow the researcher to examine how structural conditions within the story world change as events accumulate.

The distinction between the custodial framework and earlier forms of algorithmic criticism lies primarily in the object being described. Algorithmic criticism typically transforms the text in order to expose patterns. Clusters of vocabulary, stylistic signatures, or recurring motifs become visible once the text has been reorganized through rule-based procedures.

The custodial framework approaches the narrative primarily as a system of evolving conditions. The computational apparatus constructs a record of interventions that alter the structural conditions of the story world. Each recorded event corresponds to an action that modifies the range of futures available to the narrative system.

The resulting dataset therefore describes systemic change in a way that resembles a record of state transitions within a dynamic environment. Narrative development appears as a trajectory moving through regions of greater or lesser possibility.

Literary interpretation frequently recognizes moments in which a narrative situation becomes constrained or unstable. The custodial framework provides a vocabulary and an instrument that allow those shifts to be documented in a consistent way. The analysis remains focused on the internal dynamics of a single work while drawing upon computational instrumentation to record structural change across the narrative sequence.

Custodial Intelligence and the Maintenance of Possibility Space

The concept of custodianship clarifies how the framework approaches intelligent action within complex systems. When intelligence is described in custodial terms, attention shifts from command toward the maintenance of structural conditions.

Two familiar models of intelligent behavior provide a useful contrast. Optimization describes a process in which a system searches among possible configurations in order to locate a preferred outcome defined by an objective function. Many machine learning systems operate according to this principle. Parameters are adjusted until the system produces results that minimize a loss function or maximize a reward signal.

Control systems follow a related pattern. The system monitors its state relative to a desired condition and applies corrective adjustments that keep the system within a stable range. Thermostats regulate temperature in a room, and autopilot systems maintain the course of an aircraft while disturbances are absorbed through continuous correction.

Both approaches assume that a desired outcome or target state can be defined in advance. The system evaluates its behavior according to the degree to which it approaches that objective.

Difficulties arise in environments where the objective function cannot be specified with confidence or where stability cannot be defined relative to a single preferred configuration. Many ecological, technological, and social systems display this property. Their long-term viability depends on preserving the capacity to adapt as conditions change.

Custodial intelligence addresses this circumstance. Instead of directing trajectories toward a single outcome, the system maintains the structural conditions under which viable trajectories remain accessible. The central concern becomes the navigability of the space itself.

Examples drawn from infrastructure illustrate the point. Early communication networks relied on centralized architectures in which traffic passed through a small number of critical nodes. These arrangements functioned efficiently during normal operation, but the failure of one of those nodes could interrupt communication across the system. Later network de-

signs adopted distributed routing strategies that allow traffic to move along multiple paths. From the perspective of efficiency the distributed system may appear redundant. From the perspective of custodianship the redundancy preserves the possibility of continued operation when conditions change.

Comparable dynamics appear in scientific research environments. Fields that sustain methodological diversity often prove more resilient than those that converge rapidly on a single dominant technique. Competing approaches expose limitations in one another and create opportunities for hybrid methods. The resulting intellectual environment supports exploration across a wider conceptual terrain.

In each case the system maintains structural features that protect the availability of future trajectories. Redundancy, interoperability, reversibility, and diversity contribute to this capacity because they preserve access to alternative configurations.

The custodial perspective therefore evaluates intelligent behavior through a different criterion. Instead of asking whether the system identifies the optimal outcome, the analysis asks whether its actions maintain the conditions under which multiple outcomes remain reachable.

Attention shifts toward signals that indicate contraction or expansion of the possibility space. For example, an ecosystem that loses species diversity becomes less capable of adapting to environmental disturbance. A technological infrastructure that abandons compatibility with earlier standards may prevent future systems from interacting with it. A research culture that discourages unconventional questions may reduce the likelihood that unexpected discoveries will appear.

The custodian does not intervene in every instance of contraction. Some narrowing of possibilities accompanies ordinary systemic change. The critical concern involves thresholds beyond which recovery becomes difficult. Once a lake ecosystem shifts into persistent eutrophic conditions, returning the system to its earlier configuration requires extensive intervention. Similar dynamics appear in social and technological environments where early signals of structural narrowing often remain unnoticed until alternatives have already disappeared.

Reversibility offers one way of recognizing custodial behavior. Systems that preserve the ability to reconsider earlier decisions maintain a broader configuration space than systems that commit irreversibly to a single trajectory. In software design this principle appears in modular architectures that allow components to be replaced without rewriting the entire system. In public policy it appears in experimental programs that remain open to revision as evidence accumulates.

Reversibility does not eliminate commitment. Systems continue to follow trajectories through time. The custodial perspective asks whether those commitments preserve the capacity for later adjustment.

Transportation infrastructure provides a clear illustration. A road network that includes multiple routes between destinations allows traffic to redistribute when accidents or weather conditions disrupt one pathway. A region that depends on a single corridor becomes vulnerable when that corridor fails. Planners therefore evaluate connectivity and redundancy alongside efficiency when designing resilient transportation systems.

These examples highlight a broader principle. Intelligent action within complex environments often depends on maintaining background structures that support adaptive behavior. Systems that neglect those background conditions may achieve short-term efficiency while gradually undermining their own resilience.

In contemporary technological environments this issue carries particular importance. Large computational systems increasingly serve as environments through which important functions such as communication, research, and economic exchange take place. Design decisions embedded within those systems influence the possibilities available to their users. Interfaces shape which forms of action remain accessible. Data standards determine which systems can interact. Recommendation mechanisms influence which information remains visible.

Seen from a custodial perspective these design choices affect the navigability of the broader digital environment. Systems that support interoperability and transparent standards preserve a richer configuration space than systems that isolate users within closed infrastructures.

The concept of custodianship therefore provides a vocabulary for describing how intelligence operates within environments whose complexity exceeds the scope of direct control. Instead of pursuing a single objective, custodial intelligence maintains the conditions under which diverse trajectories remain possible.

The next section applies this conceptual framework to narrative systems. Stories provide a compact environment in which structural transformations become visible. Characters intervene within a situation, altering the conditions under which later events occur. Observing those interventions through the lens of possibility space reveals patterns that remain difficult to articulate within traditional descriptive language.

Custodial Intelligence and the Interpretation of Narrative Systems

The preceding sections introduced phasespace custodianship as a way of describing intelligence in relation to the maintenance of possibility space. The discussion has so far remained at the level of conceptual clarification. The present section turns toward the analytic implications of the framework and prepares the ground for its application to narrative systems.

A narrative may be approached as a sequence of events unfolding within a structured field of possibilities. Characters act within situations shaped by institutions, social relations, material constraints, and psychological dispositions. These elements together define the conditions under which events may occur. When a character acts, those conditions change. Some actions widen the range of futures available within the story world. Other actions close paths that were previously open. The story proceeds through a sequence of interventions that alter the conditions within which later events become possible. Pressure accumulates when those conditions restrict the range of viable trajectories.

Traditional literary interpretation often emphasizes motive, symbolism, or thematic meaning. While those approaches remain valuable, the custodial framework addresses a different dimension of narrative structure. The analysis asks how actions within the story alter the range of futures available to the characters and to the narrative system itself.

Some events preserve existing possibilities. Others open trajectories that were previously unavailable. Still others close paths that had appeared viable. A narrative often develops through a chain of such adjustments. Each intervention modifies the configuration space in which subsequent events occur.

A simple example illustrates the idea. Consider a community that maintains a network of reciprocal obligations among its members. When hardship arises, individuals may rely on that network for support. If mistrust or institutional failure erodes those relationships, the range of viable responses narrows. Characters become isolated. The story begins to move toward outcomes that would not have been likely when communal support remained intact.

The analytic interest in such cases lies in the structural transformation rather than in the moral evaluation of events. The framework provides a vocabulary for describing how the conditions of possibility change as the narrative proceeds.

Within this perspective characters perform interventions that modify structural conditions. An action may increase the leverage available to a character, undermine the stability of an institution, or reveal a constraint that had remained latent. The narrative trajectory emerges from the cumulative interaction of these interventions.

Stories often produce a sense of mounting pressure as the range of viable options narrows. That pressure may arise through overt conflict or through the gradual erosion of alternatives. Observing the narrative as a possibility space allows the analyst to describe these shifts without reducing them to thematic summary.

The language of phasespace therefore functions as a descriptive tool. It allows narrative change to be articulated in terms of accessibility, constraint, and transition within a structured field of possibilities.

Analytical Apparatus

The conceptual vocabulary introduced above becomes operational through a computational apparatus designed to record structural interventions within the narrative sequence. The purpose of the apparatus is not to automate interpretation. It produces a structured observational record that can be examined alongside the text.

The analytical pipeline identifies candidate custodial events within the narrative. Each event corresponds to an action that alters the structural conditions of the story world. These interventions may involve decisions made by characters, institutional responses, revelations of hidden information, or shifts in the distribution of power among actors.

Once an intervention has been identified, the apparatus records a set of attributes associated with that event. These attributes include the acting agent responsible for the intervention, the target of the action, and the scale at which the intervention operates. Additional attributes estimate the force associated with the intervention, the leverage it produces within the narrative system, and the broader systemic effect that follows.

Each event also receives a position within the textual sequence through paragraph identifiers. This indexing allows the analytical record to remain anchored to the text itself. Researchers can therefore examine the computational observations alongside the specific passages from which they were derived.

The measurements produced by the apparatus should not be interpreted as intrinsic properties of the narrative. They function as instrument readings generated by the analytical procedure. Their value lies in providing a consistent framework for observing structural change.

Once the custodial log has been assembled, the resulting dataset allows the researcher to examine patterns that develop across the narrative. Several forms of observation become possible.

One representation traces the accumulation of structural pressure across the story. As interventions accumulate, the system registers shifts in the degree of constraint present within the narrative environment. Periods in which pressure increases often correspond to moments when several constraints interact or when earlier interventions propagate consequences through the system.

Another representation examines the relation between force and leverage. Some interventions require substantial effort yet produce limited structural change. Other interventions involve relatively small actions that generate significant systemic consequences. Mapping these relations across the narrative reveals where leverage appears and how it interacts with the broader configuration of the story.

A further analytical layer attempts to approximate the phasespace implied by the narrative. Regions of relative stability appear where the configuration of possibilities changes slowly. Zones of instability appear where small events redirect the trajectory of the story. Transitional passages resemble phase changes within dynamic systems.

This description should be understood as heuristic rather than literal. Literary texts do not provide sufficient information to reconstruct a fully specified multidimensional state space. The apparatus instead records locations within the narrative sequence where structural transformation becomes visible.

When applied to a narrative, the apparatus therefore produces a series of structured observations rather than an interpretive argument. The researcher remains responsible for evaluating the significance of those observations within the broader context of literary analysis.

Initial Case Study

The initial empirical study accompanying this conceptual paper examines Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." The story provides a compact narrative environment in which psychological tension, moral pressure, and institutional authority interact across a limited sequence of events.

The brevity of the text makes it suitable for demonstrating the apparatus. The resulting dataset can be inspected in detail alongside the original paragraphs from which the observations were derived. Each intervention recorded by the instrument remains visible within the textual sequence.

The purpose of the case study is methodological. The analysis asks whether the custodial framework reveals aspects of narrative structure that remain difficult to describe through conventional vocabulary. If the apparatus identifies patterns that correspond with recognizable shifts in the story's trajectory, the framework may prove useful for examining larger narratives.

The case study therefore functions as an instrument test rather than as a definitive interpretation of Poe's story. The analysis evaluates whether the observational framework produces patterns that literary scholars find worth pursuing.

The prototype analysis pipeline for this research is maintained in a Git repository, but has not yet been published on GitHub.

Conclusion: Research Program

The framework introduced here proposes a way of describing narratives as dynamic systems in which events alter the structural conditions under which later events become possible. Rather than treating a story only as a sequence of incidents or as a vehicle for thematic meaning, phasespace custodianship treats it as a changing configuration of possibility. Narrative actions become interventions within that configuration. Their significance lies not only in what they accomplish locally, but also in how they reshape the range of futures available to the system.

The contribution of the framework is therefore descriptive and methodological. It provides a vocabulary for discussing narrative in terms of constraints, stability, pressure, leverage, and transition, and it offers an analytical apparatus capable of recording candidate interventions across a textual sequence. The resulting outputs do not determine interpretation. They function as instrument readings: structured observations that may support, refine, or complicate literary analysis by making systemic patterns more explicit.

This emphasis on explicit structure has broader consequences for literary study. Interpretive traditions often recognize that narratives organize pressure, distribute agency unevenly, and redirect possible futures, but these dynamics are usually described through thematic or rhetorical vocabulary.

The phasespace approach adds a complementary perspective by making those dynamics comparable across texts. It does not replace existing theoretical lenses. Instead it provides a shared structural layer through which different readings may be related more precisely to the same narrative system.

A feminist reading, for example, may focus on asymmetries in agency, leverage, and constraint across gendered roles. A Marxist reading may emphasize persistent economic pres-

sures, unequal distributions of burden, and the ways material conditions narrow viable futures. A postcolonial reading may ask how authority, legitimacy, and coercion are distributed across institutions and subjects within the story world. In each case, the framework does not determine the interpretation, but it can clarify which structural features of the narrative the interpretation is engaging.

The broader research program extends beyond the analysis of a single work. Stories provide a compact environment in which systemic dynamics can be observed at a manageable scale, but the same conceptual vocabulary may also be useful in examining other domains in which actions alter the conditions under which future developments occur. Ecological systems, technological infrastructures, and social institutions likewise display trajectories shaped by constraints, thresholds, and changing regions of viability. In this sense, the framework is relevant not only to narrative theory but to a wider family of problems concerned with the maintenance and transformation of possibility space.

Within discussions of artificial intelligence, for example, the custodial perspective suggests an alternative to models that evaluate systems solely by reference to optimization or target achievement. It shifts attention toward whether a system preserves the conditions under which diverse trajectories remain reachable. In digital environments, interfaces shape which actions remain accessible, while data standards influence which systems can interact, and recommendation mechanisms alter what information remains visible. Taken together, these structural features affect the range of futures available to the communities that rely on them.

The immediate next step, however, is literary and methodological. The empirical studies that follow test whether the framework produces observations that scholars find useful when examining the structure of particular narratives.

If it does, phasespace custodianship will offer literary studies a formal and reproducible method for modeling how stories organize pressure, control, and change over time. That contribution is meant to support, not displace, existing interpretive practice. Scholars may still read a narrative through feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, or other theoretical lenses; the difference is that those readings can now be related to a more explicit account of how interventions, constraints, and shifts in possibility are distributed across the narrative system.

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