

THE TRUTH IS

1. Leveling up your craft to write a story that lives long after you've left the planet is what some might call a ridiculous goal.
2. You know that you will not tell that story after reading just one how-to-write book.
3. You know that you will not tell that story as the result of taking one seminar.
4. You know that creating a timeless work of art will require the dedication of a world-class athlete. You will be training your mind with as much ferocity and single-minded purpose as an Olympic gold medal hopeful. That kind of cognitive regimen excites you, but you just haven't found a convincing storytelling dojo to do that work.

5. The path to leveling up your creative craft is a dark and treacherous course. You've been at it a long time, and it often feels like you're wearing three-dimensional horse blinders. More times than you'd wish to admit, you're not sure if you are moving north or south or east or west. And the worst part? You can't see anyone else, anywhere going through what you're going through. You're all alone.

**WELCOME TO THE STORY GRID
UNIVERSE. HERE'S HOW WE
CONTEND WITH THOSE TRUTHS:**

1. We believe we find meaning in the pursuit of creations that last longer than we do. It is not ridiculous. Dedicating our work to seizing opportunities and overcoming obstacles as we stretch ourselves to reach for seemingly unreachable creations is transformational. We believe this pursuit is the most valuable and honorable way to spend our time here. Even if...especially if...we never reach our lofty creative goals.

2. Writing just one story isn't going to take us to the top. We're moving from point A to Point A⁵⁰⁰⁰. We've got lots of mountains to climb, lots of rivers and oceans to cross, and many deep dark forests to traverse in our way. We need topographic guides on demand, and if they're not available now, we'll have to figure it out and write them ourselves.

3. While we're drawn to seminars to consume the imparted wisdom from an icon in the arena, we leave with something far more valuable than the curriculum. We get to meet the universe's other pilgrims and compare notes on the terrain.
4. The Story Grid Universe has a virtual dojo, a university to work out and get stronger—the place to stumble, correct the mistakes, and stumble again until the moves become automatic, lethal, and mesmerizing to outside observers.
5. The Story Grid Universe has a performance space, a publishing house dedicated to leveling up the craft with clear boundaries of progress, and the ancillary reference resources to pack for each project mission. There is an infinite number of paths to where you want to be with a story that works.

Seeing how others made it down their own private yellow brick roads to release their creations into the timeless creative cosmos will help keep you on the straight and narrow path.

All are welcome—the more, the merrier—but please abide by the golden rule.

Put the Work Above All Else, and trust the process.

THE STORY GRID UNIVERSE

LEVELING UP YOUR CRAFT

SHAWN COYNE



STORY GRID



STORY GRID

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For

All Past, Present and Future Story Nerds

THE WAY THINGS ARE

YOUR MISSION

You're on a mission. You're looking for your arena—the performance space to throw down all within you. You wish to leave everything you have on that field.

It's been a painful and challenging journey so far, but you can't help yourself. No matter how many times you resolve to get off this path, like Michael Corleone, the pilgrimage “pulls you back in.” It's the only mission that matters to you.

You've tried others.

They didn't work.

There was far too much negative feeling on them and not nearly enough positive, even when, especially when, you reached a new mile marker. You were supposed to feel better, celebrate the triumph. But the payoff didn't mean anything to you.

Slowly, you figured out those other roads didn't matter. So you abandoned them for this dark hardscrabble trail you've been on for God knows how long.

When you move even a millimeter further here, though, you get an indescribable charge of satisfaction. When obstacles emerge, pushing you two steps back, you get a body blow of despair, but it doesn't last all that long. You know you're on the right path, so somehow you figure out a way to move three steps forward.

You've been on this journey for what seems a very long time. You know it to be authentic, but it's lonely. Especially when others on divergent, better-paved roads scream at you to "get the hell off that trail, it's dangerous!"

Staying the course has been enough for you. At least that's what you tell yourself.

Now and then you meet another traveler. But they inevitably speak a different language. You smile, nod at one another and move down your separate tributaries—one more opportunity to compare notes with a sympathetic soul lost.

You're traveling alone, and if you're not exactly at peace with that truth, at least you've accepted it.

But deep down, you want and need more. Late at night, you think there must be more

than this. That's when the vision scrolls through your mind of a place where it wasn't so lonely, so isolating, so often despairing. There must be a place for you and others like you somewhere.

Sometimes you lose sight of it, but deep down, you know your promised land is real. You tell yourself to keep moving, and one day you'll pass through its garden gates and be embraced by the others who've reached it before you.

Once you're there, you'll rest. You'll get something to eat. Get acclimated. But then you'll start the real work. You'll mind shift from amateur to professional and learn to do the things professionals do.

Workouts with fellow aspiring amateurs are supervised by professionals with quick feedback loops and intense, demanding training with mentors. Here you will earn your bones as an artist.

You'll learn how to analyze the masterworks. You'll discover their form. And you'll learn how to repeat a whole smorgasbord of micro and macro processes that show you how to analyze and form your work, inspired by your favorites. You'll perform them again and again, and progressively you'll gain confidence.

Analyze. Formalize. Mechanize. Repeat.
Repeat. Repeat.

You understand this environment will demand a lot from you, like the simulated training dojo that Neo and Morpheus jacked into in *The Matrix*.

Do you remember those virtual training sessions? Neo was a neophyte and Morpheus was his mentor and sponsor, the one to prepare him for the battles with the agents of the artificially globally intelligent machine ahead. No one in the tribe of realists doubted the power of the agents of the virtual cyberspace. What's more, it was a given that Neo would not just be required to perform to his highest capacity fighting for himself. Everyone knew Neo was the "one," the indispensable agent, the last best hope for the entire tribe. The linchpin.

Without Neo, all would be lost.

SHE'S LEAVING HOME

In your dreams, you reach the promised proving ground.

You watch the practitioners in this righteous environment enact their agency under the constraints defined by this unique garden dojo, and the results of the processes are, somewhat miraculously in your experience, unambiguous.

They result in one event or another.

Either the analysis of the work is revelatory of progress, it's getting closer to "working," or the analysis determines it is necessary to try again. It's "not working."

You now know you are where you should be. You're getting clear feedback. And it's coming very quickly.

It's either "Yes, that worked."

Or

“No, that didn’t work. You’ll need to try something else.”

As you hang out with the other warrior writers in training, you breathe a sigh of relief. So many here perform better than you that there is no way you’re indispensable. There’s no way you’re the “one.”

You can relax. And soon, shockingly, others come to you for help and advice because you’ve mastered something they haven’t yet. You can take what you need here, get stronger, and level up with little pushback from jealous colleagues.

You set all of that crap about “what if I’m not good enough” aside and do the work.

Yeah, that wasn’t my best effort. Let me try something else this time.

The training facility inside this garden is a sacred space, spartan and stoic but heartfelt too. It requires everything in your cognitive capacity to apply yourself here. And when you take action, there’s an immediate equal and opposite reaction. Your kicks either land with powerful intent or they don’t.

You take the failures and the successes with equal aplomb.

No matter how much you resist it—and your intent at the start is to not “lose yourself”

during this process—the training changes you. It makes you stronger, less fragile, less afraid. When you get lost, you've got peeps to help you find exactly where you went astray, and they pull you back home.

Most of the trainees are not competing with you either. Most of them are urging you to keep pushing ahead, keep challenging yourself, and keep leveling up your craft. You write off the minority of stubborn underminers not yet “sold” on the place. You understand that it's essential to have rabble-rousers challenging the dojo masters. They need to stay sharp too. Pushing back and challenging their authority refresh them—the most helpful welcome thoughtful criticism.

But the garden has a few snakes too. Every powerful group attracts mini-Machiavellis. They resolve to smuggle the magic out of the dojo and manipulate it for their ends. But you come to realize they too are vital. The snakes keep everyone focused on the purpose of the place, and when they raise their heads, the group escorts them to the garden gate and gently shows them the way out.

The process of creating the work is the reward. It's a qualitative process-oriented arena, not quantitative results-oriented arena. The practice is to trust the process. The snakes are incapable of buying into that

ethos, so they can put results first somewhere else.

Cool. You're all in.

This garden dojo is a panacea for what's been troubling you, the loneliness inherent in traveling an ill-defined path. You're stronger now and feel like a part of something larger than yourself. What was once vague and confusing is now second nature to you. You can diagnose a problem inside of your domain in minutes when it used to take days if you ever recognized the problem at all.

But for all of the bonhomie, another voice deep down inside of you whispers.

Come on, get real here... what's the point of training if there is no performance, no battle, no event to test yourself? You're playing around in this magical fairyland of feel-good. Being sold a bill of goods by well-meaning people, who, let's face it, don't know you very well.

When's the test? When is shit going to get real? When are the people outside of this fairyland going to recognize you as formidable, worthwhile...someone to listen to and respect? When are you going to make it?

This voice gets louder and louder, day after day.

It's time to leave.

You have to test your skills, push your work into the outside world.

You resolve to leave the garden dojo.

Because at the very depths of your soul, you now know the molten truth.

You are the one. You are Neo.

THE VALLEY OF THE FIVE-LEGGED
MONOLITH ON THE SHORES OF THE
DEEP, DARK EVER-EXPANDING LAKE

Recognizing that you are Neo is paradoxical.

It's a psychic salve. You know what you have to do.

But it's also a terrifying neurotransmitter that compounds your anxiety.

After all, being Neo means you are targeting the creation of a timeless work of art. That's your goal. Isn't that, at the very least, an arrogant ambition? It's filled with hubris. And, even though you don't believe in that stuff, it has a slice of blasphemy about it too.

Nevertheless, in the middle of the night, when all are sleeping, you slip off of your rice mat. You pull on your backpack filled with your handcrafted garden dojo tools and ease through the kitchen's screen door.

Leaving feels right, and that's enough. You leave the shelter of the walled garden.

Not a soul rouses to stop you.

Walking the dewy pre-dawn path, you remember that everyone chooses to leave that promised land. A few stay longer than the rest, but even they eventually leave. Oddly, it feels like your sisters and brothers are walking alongside you. Their spirits have formed a defensive shield around you.

That big chasm you need to leap a quarter of the way down the path? One of your sisters already told you about it, so you're ready for it and jump it with ease.

Much later in the afternoon, you find yourself confronting another extraordinary world.

It's a destination too, like the magical garden where you honed your skills, but it's far more imposing, menacing even. It's mesmerizing also, a vibrant congregation of people from multiple domains. It feels potent, not nearly as touchy-feely and forgiving as that safe space garden dojo.

It's alluring and intimidating. Practically irresistible.

If I can make it here, you think.

You're not a newbie anymore, and you recognize the hungry peripheral creatures trying to sell you magical beans, special sauce, and short-cut maps. They don't frighten you all that much. They're more of an annoyance.

You've got skills, and you know a bullshitter when you hear one now. You walk on by them, deeper and deeper into the forest, ignoring their warnings about what lies ahead.

It's mountainous terrain, filled with astounding trees that block the sunlight. You navigate as best you can until you come to a cliff.

Before you is an impossibly immense valley wilderness. You suspect it contains all kinds of predators, allies, and shapeshifters, and you know it will be difficult to distinguish which is which and who is who.

You'll deal with that later. You're looking for the target, the destination. You can't concern yourself with the inevitable distractions.

You focus. The trees climb higher and higher, but as you look upward, you notice they too are dwarfed.

For above the trees rise five towers. You track them skyward and see that the towers reach into the heavens.

You look even closer.

At that moment, a stranger steps into your peripheral vision. You startle, but there's something about her that holds your feet.

"Don't worry. I'm here to help," she says.

"Who are you?" you ask.

"I'm your muse."

"You don't look like a muse."

“Yeah, I get that a lot. I ditched the flowing diaphanous gown a while ago. It kept getting snarled in the bramble, and most of the men I worked with, some of the women too, got too distracted when I met with them. I kept having to say, ‘Eyes up here!’ Khakis and work shirt are much more comfortable and appropriate. I’ve been looking over your shoulder for years. It’s nice to see your face finally. You’ve got a friendly face.”

“Thank you. So do you. Um, so what am I supposed to do now?”

“Well, I’ll tell you what most people do and what some people do, but you’ll need to figure out for yourself what you need to do. I’m mean I’m a muse, not a dictator. Fair?”

“Fair.”

“From what I see, you know it’s time that you took your creation out of your knapsack and introduced it into the world. Right? Story meet world, that sort of thing? That’s why you’re not back at the dojo creating something else?”

“Yes.”

“Cool. So look up there. Just beneath the clouds, can you see?”

You nod.

“Concealed passageways attach tower one to tower two to tower three to tower four to tower five and back again to tower one. The five

towers, at the very top, merge into one circular monolithic fortress that soars above and beyond the seeable atmosphere. It's pretty impressive, and it took hundreds of years to construct."

"It's breathtaking! It's as if the Egyptian pyramids came together to form one massive structure that shot straight into the cosmos," you agree. "Is that where the timeless creations the mentors at the garden dojo talked about are sponsored, created, and released into the world? I mean it goes right up into the sky, and that's the only discernible way to reach the top, isn't it?"

"Well, yes and no. The majority of famous stories, the ones that change people, came out of that monolith. But correlation doesn't mean causation."

"I'm not sure what you mean by that."

"Never mind. You'll figure it out yourself. The monolith is a platform that can put your story into the world, and most storytellers spend a lot of their time plotting how to get inside. Too much time if you ask me. And there is another way, a relatively newish but rapidly expanding way, to put your work into the world too."

"Where?"

"Do you see that brackish lake on the other side of the monolith?"

“How could I miss it?”

“Well, the other alternative is to take your story, wrap it up in meta-data, and then toss it into the lake. It will be sucked down into a pipeline that will shoot it into the Story cosmos too, just like the monolith.”

“Really? It’s that simple?”

“That’s another thing you’ll have to figure out yourself. I may have said too much already.” And with that, your muse turns and disappears into the thicket.

You’re not paying attention to her anyway. You’re fixated on the five-legged monolith. You can’t take your eyes off of it.

“Aha,” you resolve. “I see the forest for the trees now. As long as I can enter just one of those towers, in time, I can rise and rise and rise until I make my way to the top. And then I will find myself loved by those who consume the creations of my skilled labor and feared by those who would dare challenge my powers. And isn’t that the definition of divinity? To be both loved and feared in equal measure?”

And off you go, down into the shadows of the dark forest valley of the five-legged monolith.

You soon discover that the forest is alive with voices. They whisper to you as you get closer and closer to the monolith’s center. They tell you that the only way inside is through the

inner circle defined by the nexus outline of the five towers. You'll know you are there when you discover the towers' foundations, which are made up of the stones from hundreds of other towers that came before them.

And within this inner sanctum sanctorum stands the tallest trees in the forest.

All of the voices you hear promise varying degrees of access to the only means into the towers. To reach their lofty gated doors, all one must do is climb up a tree. The climb will cover your work with that tree's particular mesmeric sap and thus appeal to the threshold guardians at the gates. The taller the tree, the sweeter the sap, and the higher the tower floor one can enter the interlocking monolith.

You reason that the tree sap seduces the guardians behind the tower doors. The sweeter the juice, the more transfixed the gatekeepers find themselves. And the more transfixed, the more willing they will be to invite you inside, into the domain that promises ascension into the heavens.

You begin your search for the tallest trees and prepare yourself to shimmy upward.

But the barriers to those first branches prove too high to ascend on your own. Now the shapeshifters approach you in full force. They promise a lift here, a ladder there, all for a

reasonable price or a mutually beneficial quid pro quo.

They tell you that everything you think you know about how to attract the favor of the trees and by association the attention of the monolith is incorrect, naive, silly really. All of that so-called training you received at that weird garden dojo doesn't mean diddly here.

That training, that knowledge, and that camaraderie is worthless in this real world. Here you are judged by the marketplace, not by fellow garden dojo nerds. Your very grammar, the way you present your work, is a liability here. You need to keep all of that stuff to yourself. It will hurt you.

The fact is there is no way to improve skills in this desirous real creative marketplace, where one can be loved and feared. Making it into the monolith, the only actual machinery that makes dreams come true, requires a proper introduction and of course, this goes without saying, a certain mystical je ne sais quoi. Mere mortals should not knock on the five towers' citadel doors, only the supernaturally chosen. Only people who are called "talented" can find a place here.

And then the shapeshifters pull you aside, out of the ears of the trees.

A secret way exists, that only they know about, to help a person such as you sneak

inside. No guarantees of course, but here is a list of all of the famous monolith idols who've used our services. It's pretty impressive. Some of your favorite writers are on it.

Surely you wouldn't pass up the chance to get what they got? Would you? That's your dream. Isn't it?

So maybe you're not one of the Bronte sisters. Who is? But with the right snap, crackle, and pop attached to you, you'll look like a Bronte, and those doors will open for you. Isn't that as good? Fake it until you make it?

You stand tall.

You refuse to sell out your time in the garden dojo. You won't reject what you've worked so hard to attain...the skills to create the very work nobody seems all that much interested in hearing. They want to put you in some suit and dress you up in an inauthentic persona—even if it's one of your favorite costumes and you confess you've tried it on yourself before.

You appreciate their advice and all, but you can't do it. You have to believe in the work, not the artifice that packages the work.

“Yes, yes, the work is most important,” they all agree, “but isn't it best to discuss your creation with a real expert, one of the monks inside of the monolith who knows how stories

work. Not theoretically, but actually? Those who've never proven themselves inside the marketplace, we mean, like, what do they know?"

It's a compelling argument.

One of three things happens next.

ATTACK OF THE REJECTION MONSTER

After tens of tries trying to reach the first branch on the tallest trees by yourself, you regroup. The probability of you getting that sap on your work is infinitesimally small.

You move on to the medium-sized trees. They don't reach quite as high up the five towers as the tallest do, but they have branches close enough to the ground for you to grab if you summon all of your resources.

You make it to a very friendly looking mid-height-er.

The tree welcomes you aboard. It lets you rest for a while to regain your strength and then asks you to alter your work to make it the most palatable to the threshold guardians inside the five-towered monolith. Their tree sap will get your work a hearing, but once on trial, it must speak for itself. Their suggestions

are helpful if somewhat unspecific and scattershot.

You do what's required and slowly climb the tree to the top. You've reached the highest branch when the work is ready to offer to the gatekeepers of the five towers.

A tree nymph tosses your offering onto a door keeper's landing.

You and the tree now wait. And wait. And wait.

You can't stop thinking about what's happening inside those towers. No matter how you try, you find it impossible to begin work on another project, so you distract yourself with other pursuits. You shimmy down the tree to spend more time with your new friends, the ones who are teaching you all of the real rules of the domain, which entail figuring out how to best project the "talented" persona. I mean, if it looks like a duck, talks like a duck, and acts like it a duck, it must be a duck. They keep telling you not to worry, not to question the way this weeding out process works, to be cool. If it's meant to be, it's meant to be. If not, at least you tried, right? You nod your agreement.

And then it all falls apart.

The tree tells you that your work was a "pass." You ask about the other four towers. Could we try those? The tree coldly informs

you that all of them have passed and it's time for you to go away.

You explain that you have other projects and that together you and the tree could try again, perhaps with one of those. The tree explains that you only get one chance per year, and even that's a stretch. More like two years. It's just the way it works. Lots of people want inside those towers. The gatekeepers only have so many hours in a day, and they need to cast a wide net. Any more time they spend on you is less they can spend finding someone else.

Come back with something "fresh," something more "catchy," or "edgy," something with an inescapable narrative drive next time. In a year or so, not sooner.

And then the tree turns her metaphorical back on you.

You run to your new friends. Surely they'll be able to assuage your horror about being so quickly written off.

But they are otherwise engaged. These formerly friendly shapeshifters are "swamped" with other work, and while they're sorry things didn't work out for you, they can't get together at the drop of a hat. You should stop being so needy, they all sagely advise.

The truth of it in their eyes is that, with this rejection and especially the way you handled it, you've proven yourself to be "untalented."

Even so common as to be incapable of even faking talent. No one needs those kinds of friends.

Their view of you couldn't be worse. It's obvious now that you're not a member of their crowd and you never will be. They wish you would go away to wherever your sort of people who cannot get inside the monolith go.

And apparently, there is a place for the untalented.

Without hesitation, every last one of them tells you that perhaps you ought to look into that dark, chaotic realm where the monoliths' rejects go—the ones who can't seem to quit their silly writer fantasy lives. They tell you you should look into something called "self-publishing," an open market where misfit hackneyed storytellers ply their wares.

You thank them for the advice in the same split second you realize they've just given you the kiss-off to end all kiss-offs. Circumstances beyond your control have eclipsed the reasons you committed to this hardscrabble journey in the first place.

One thing's for sure. You need to leave this valley of the five-legged monolith. You're very cold, and it's getting pitch black.

Is the chaos of self-publishing the place for you? Perhaps, but publishing must entail more than just production and unconscious belief.

There has to be more to it than “throw it out there and see if it sticks.” Isn’t there? There must be a purpose for stories beyond the bottom line.

Do you want to enter into a profession in which you know nothing? Do you want to put your story creation process on hold to educate yourself about an entirely different discipline?

No.

You want to write, to keep leveling up, but inside the competitive arena. After all, you’re a professional. Where can you do that?

ATTACK OF THE VALIDATION MONSTER

Through pure dint of monomaniacal concentrated effort, you learn what is required to leap up to a towering tree's lowest branch. And because this is your dream, the thing you always longed to attain... entree to a bright stairway up into the heavens of "Art"...you do whatever's necessary to get that chance.

Your partner one night offhandedly mentions that her cousin was college roommates with the head of a high-level tree's mailroom, which means she's next in line to fill a desk beneath a mid-trunk associate nymph when one opens up.

You beg your partner to pressure her cousin to set up a meeting with you and the tree's top-of-the-line mailroom clerk.

She refuses.

But you will not be denied. You pester and

pester and use everything in your emotional manipulation box of tricks to finally get a surrender.

This reasonable rhetoric proves to be the magical key to get what you want:

“Doesn’t the mailroom clerk need to find new talent to get ahead?” you innocently ask.

“Well, technically, I guess so,” she says.

“So why don’t you introduce me? Don’t you think I’m good enough? You don’t think I’m talented?”

“Of course I do...” And then, as you silently wait...the lock unlatches. “Yes, of course, I’ll make the call. I’m sorry for being such a wimp.”

“Thank you so much!” you say, half happy, half disappointed in yourself for playing that trick.

“No big deal,” and as if practicing what she’ll say to her cousin to get the favor, “I’m just offering an opportunity to my cousin’s ex-roommate...no big deal.”

Excellent, you think. Your partner will use the same argument you did with her cousin, who will use it with her ex-roommate. All you have to do now is act the part of the talented genius when you get the meeting.

But secretly, you know it is a big deal. Because if your work proves you’re “untalented,” the mailroom clerk will be mad

at your partner's cousin for wasting her time. And that could be the end of that friendship. But geez if their bond is that tenuous and that happens, you're probably doing her a favor. The rationalization machine in your mind is formidable.

"But I am talented!" you say to yourself. "Stop undermining yourself. Believe in yourself."

Your partner's cousin gets you the meeting with the mail clerk.

The cognitive effort necessary to accomplish this mini-goal sets you a month back on your next project, but what's the use of writing another story that you'll have to dump into your "unpublished" trunk, you ask yourself. God helps those who help themselves.

"Just get in the door" becomes your mantra.

You "wow" the mail clerk with the perfect combination of offhanded humble bragging about that famous college you went to or the fact that your great-great-great-grandmother was Willa Cather or somesuch.

You hand over your work to her, perfectly primed for "positioning it" to higher-ups in her tree's nymph hierarchy. For all practicality, she doesn't even have to read the thing. You've done your homework and boiled it down to a single "high concept," which

aligns with the current demands of the marketplace.

What happens next makes no sense at all.

Somehow, the mailroom clerk throws caution to the wind and gets your project to the top branch of the tree.

The boss of bosses nymph at the top takes a particular interest in your work and makes a single phone call to her Wednesday a.m. tennis partner who also happens to be the leader of Tower Number Three. And out of Tower Number Three's discretionary fund, the nymph's tennis partner offers to pre-empt your work. To take it off of the market before any of the other towers even see it.

The money involved is crazy. You won't have to "work" again for the next two and a half years—no more freelancing to pay your famous college's tuition loans.

Your "deal" becomes the deal of the day at the industry's top news source. You've never felt such validation and power in your life.

That radiant energy lasts about six days.

And then it hits you.

Maybe you just got lucky, and perhaps you aren't what everyone in the trade is saying about you. You're a big fat fraud who manipulated the person you chose to spend your life with to falsify your credentials to a stranger who didn't even read your novel. It's

evident from her vague commentary and lack of any substantial notes about the work that she never read the thing from page 1 to page 367. The whole process went so fast, so much quicker than it would reasonably take, that the results feel irrational. Random. Unmeaningful.

Now what?

Your book is published. It does fine, and everyone makes a little bit of money; you do, the publisher does, and the nymph at the top of your agency tree too. But no one is wild with excitement about you and your talent anymore, least of all you. You're just about out of money, and the new project you've created is okay. It's not great, but it's not terrible either. It's fine.

Your imprint publisher at Tower Number Three goes for it, thinking that the head of the entire tower has some attachment to you after that pre-empt she made without the imprint publisher's knowledge. They publish your second novel.

But this one falls off a cliff. It sells less than half of what the first one sold. Your contract is up, and you need to write something significant to save your ass from losing your "in" at the monolith.

You bust your butt on a new project.

And after a painful birthing process, in which you refused to settle for "good enough,"

you know it's killer! It's the best-executed idea you've ever created. It's so good that you're confident you are one of those people with "talent." It's without doubt; this work will set the wheels right again.

The big shot nymph in the tree thinks it's fantastic too. It's so good that she resolves to go "wide" with this one, sneaking it to the heads of the other four towers without alerting her Wednesday tennis partner at Tower Number Three. She's confident to have a significant deal on the table by the end of the week.

And then, crickets.

A month after the buzzy industry-wide submission, the last "pass" comes over the tree's transom.

Your nymph agent tells you it's not the end of the world. You have options. She's heard there's something to this new self-publishing world, the island of misfit writers. A friend of hers had a client that self-published, sold a gajillion copies to the low rent genre rubes out there across the Hudson River, and now she's about to sign a deal with Tower Number Five, a real publisher. She suggests you should look into that.

As for taking anything else of yours out to the towers inside the next year—actually, two years—the chances of that making any hay are pretty slim.

“Hang in there, kid,” she says, “I’ve got a call on the other line I have to pick up. Ciao.”

After a good hard cry or an attack on an inanimate object, you settle yourself. You take stock of things.

You felt alive, most understood, appreciated back in that garden dojo where you learned and shared all the fundamentals of story structure. Where you and like-minded story nerds learned how essential stories were to help others, and especially yourself, better navigate the world. How you even considered stories as magical beings in and of themselves like little children you were to birth and present into the world to find their way.

What happened to all of that meaning? When did the results eclipse the process?

ATTACK OF THE STAGNATION MONSTER

Maybe you've "made it." You know how the five-legged monolith works, and you've created some great work operating under its system.

You're living what many people assume is "the dream," and while it can sometimes dip into a nightmare, your regrets are too few to mention. You're a part of the story factory, and through your efforts, the monolith grows in power. But so do you. At least financially.

But some nagging questions keep popping up for you.

Is your work leveling up? Have your stories progressively proven ever more engaging while at the same time delivering more profound doses of mythic thematic truth? Do they stand up to the masterworks that made you want to tell stories in the first place? On your pantheon,

do you place yourself alongside Austen or Melville or Tyler or Morrison or Highsmith or Harris or Mann or Dostoyevsky or Khouri or whoever inspired you to write in the first place?

Do these questions piss you off? Do they make you uncomfortable?

Have you settled? Have you ever asked yourself, is this all there is?

Have you wondered if there was another way to work? Another performance space different from the glad-handing and bestseller centric monolith way. Being on one of its higher floors is a privilege and all, but there isn't anyone to share it with you. There are no brothers or sisters-in-arms to compare battle scars with at the top of Tower Number One. Everyone below you is clamoring to take your place, and everyone about you is paranoid you want to usurp them. It's not exactly heartening.

What if the work were the primary focus? A channel into the marketplace where the commerce, while essential to keeping everyone's lights on with enough food on the table and worthy of serious deliberation, didn't reign.

Where the results were just the results. They weren't the sole reason why of the performance space, and instead the point was the process of making work rise to the level of

the master writers of one's specific targeted genre.

The craft would reign; it would be the reason people chose to perform in this space.

All efforts would shoot for a mystical goal so outrageously impossible to attain that it may just be possible to get there. A goal like climbing in a wooden boat and traveling around the world when everyone knew for a fact the world was flat. A goal like walking on the moon. Or a goal like the American women's 4×100 freestyle relay victory at the 1976 Montreal Olympics.

Flawed human beings are capable of creating impossible things. That's why you started writing in the first place—to be one of those people who did whatever it took to create a timeless work of art that changes people today and tomorrow. Wouldn't that be something?

Now you know the “whatever it takes” part provides meaning: not the end, but the process. Where can you shoot for something like that?

PART I

**THE WAY THINGS
COULD BE**

GROUND ZERO

There is a thin slice of ground in the valley of the five-legged monolith on the shores of the deep dark lake. It's barren but terra firma, neither in the air or beneath the water.

In September 2017, The Story Grid fell in love with it and put down a modest deposit. With just three more monthly payments, it will be all ours. We'll take down the "Sale Pending" signs and stake it out for ourselves.

We have a name already picked out. To Storygridders, it will be known as Planet Performance, Planet Dojo's sister sphere. For everyone else, it will be formally known as Story Grid Publishing, the platform for works conceived and developed at Story Grid University, our Planet Dojo.

We need it to offer an alternative

publishing process—one that no other publisher provides today, or ever.

In a word, it must be **meaningful**.

For those who've just stepped onto the storytelling path, it will be a place to aspire. Work not ready for publication, what the monolith calls "passes" and the deep dark lake calls "books," will not be the result of the "untalented" nature of the creator. Instead, it will result when a critical mass of inherent unsolved problems in the non-working story raise their ugly heads. The writer will know why the work isn't working and will be able to choose his path to correct it. Or he can raise a white flag and begin something new, better informed, ready to up his game.

For those who've lived inside the five-legged monolith, it will be a place to refresh their love of the craft, to try new things, to take new chances without suspicion or financial reprisal. Want to write that space opera but are known as a contemporary crime writer? As long as you respect the genre and take the work seriously, we've got a room for you.

For those who've thrown baby after baby into the black waters of the deep dark lake, it will be a place where you can get back to the core of why you wanted to tell stories in the first place. No more working the algorithms, glad-handing the influencers, desperately

cranking out content because “they” say that’s what it takes to stay afloat.

What we need is to perform in a place where craft reigns. A place where faking talent by pretending to be someone else is absurd and antithetical to creation.

Planet Performance will be the garden dojo version of a publishing house, a place to bring your work into the world with minimal viable agita, dedicated to leveling up the quality of work above all else.

Where the levels begin on the ground and rationally climb upward to a well-defined goal, an apex that isn’t about you and your talent, or lack thereof, but about the work itself. The Story—the one you conceive, but you desire it to have a life all of its own.

Wouldn't it be meaningful to leave work behind that helps those you leave behind? And for all of those, you will never meet. To let others know they're not alone. That you felt what they've felt and that you came up with a story to make them understand the world and themselves, who they are and why they're here, an incremental bit better.

THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN,
PART ONE

How would we build this craft-driven performance space without it falling into the black water or becoming another brick in the five-legged monolith wall?

Let's approach this grand design problem as a scientist would. Science is a three-stage process made up of analysis, formulation, and mechanization. Don't worry. No one has to put on a white lab coat. Those are just big words for self-evident problem-solving tools.

First, we'll analyze the patterns embedded in contemporary book publishing to figure out what autonomic practices we should retain and which ones we should abandon. We'll sort the "good" stuff from the "not so good" detritus, take the good and leave the bad as our building materials.

Then we'll form a "magic wand" version of the publishing house, akin to architectural

rendering. We'll want it to appeal to our three hypothetical story creators, those recovering from rejection, validation, and stagnation monster attacks. After all, if we're going to build a performance platform, we'll want to have as many different kinds of performers in that space as possible. We're not buying the "talent" paradigm, rather the "blue-collar work" paradigm, so we must bake in equal opportunity for all kinds of writers. In no way will that mean we offer the same guaranteed outcomes, mind you, but equitable opportunities. Some works will find large audiences, some smaller. While we have some ideas about how they'll perform, we aren't in the business of trying to control the uncontrollable.

Once we have our "magic wand" formulation of our publishing performance platform, we'll begin to mechanize it. All that means is that we'll set up the systems that will get us as close to our vision of publishing paradise as we can envision right now. We'll build in an overarching "means of refreshment" order too that will allow the systems themselves to improve, level up, and become more efficient and streamlined over time.

Before we get into the specific analysis, formulation, and mechanization, though, let's

define the worst that could happen. We have a notion of our global target, an astronomically ambitious publishing platform that encourages and aids the creation of timeless stories. It will be an ordered system that allows for disruption. It will be half order and half chaos with all of us tippy-toeing forward on that narrow path between those two existential states.

Great, but shouldn't we also take a hard look at what could go wrong? What would the world look like if we lost our way? If we ventured too far into order? What would the world look like if we fell into the vortex of chaos?

Like The Odyssey's twelve-footed creature with six long necks to hold its six vicious heads each with a savage mouth lined with three rows of razor-sharp teeth, the Scylla of order is a devouring tyranny. Tyranny is a system in which a single authoritarian or group of aligned authorities holds multi-faceted powers over a disenfranchised majority. The tyranny's purpose, it's "why," is to apply all of its rational processes and reason to maintain hegemony. Power is the value at the top of its value hierarchy, subsuming even its purported purpose, profit.

What is the equivalent of the Scylla today? And how does it maintain its power? After all,

it's not literally eating the flesh and bones of human beings.

The modern Scylla is a corporate flow chart:

Boards of Directors (run by a Chairman) oversee Executive Suites, made up of Chief Executive Officers, Chief Operating Officers, Chief Investment Officers, and Chief Information Officers, who manage Presidents of the corporation made up of Heads of Sales, Heads of Marketing, Heads of Creative who oversee Vice-Presidents who run the Executive and Senior managers beneath them who in turn manage “personnel,” what were once labeled “workers.”

Many feet, many heads, many teeth.

They solidify this sturdy structure by promoting what is positioned to the disenfranchised as “merit-based invitation only” ascension.

Here's how that works—the powerful public decree that anyone can join its ranks. As proof of its openness, the power base promotes a rainbow of people and personalities inside its particular star chamber, its board of directors,

its leadership committee, or its “inner circle club.”

See, here are all of the hard-working talents that made it inside our committees of excellence. There's no reason you can't join us too.

Today's tyrannies promote their diversity as proof of their colorblind, needs-blind, cultural-background-blind magnanimity. It's a damn good argument.

But there's a catch.

The tyrannies never tell you what kind of merit you need to actually make it into the next ring. They never tell you how it is, precisely, that Jane made it to CEO or John became head of the production department.

We assume it's because Jane and John were extraordinary at doing meaningful good work. We want to believe that. But if there is no procedural description of how they do their job, how are we to emulate their path? If we don't know what micro-steps they took to master their areas of expertise, how can we learn from their “rise to the top” story?

The probability is that Jane and John are hard-working, dedicated professionals. They did develop a procedural methodology to rise to the top of their particular power hierarchy.

But their hold on their positions is so tenuous, a truth the established powers reinforce aggressively, they are averse to sharing their methods with others. Instead, they cryptically describe themselves as a regular person—even-keeled and perhaps humbly blessed with a knack for their particular skill set.

These explanations solidify the “talent” paradigm. Something within these people connotes natural ability, which embodies effortless performance. We must have this too, but no one tells us how to get it. In fact, the word is that it’s impossible to acquire. You either have it, or you don’t.

That’s the problem with the Scylla system. It’s a zero-sum game. If I give my hard-won power away by teaching you my methods, chances are you’ll use those methods against me. You’ll make it to the top over my back, and I’ll be pushed back into the disenfranchised group.

And here’s another problematic truth about tyrannies too. They don’t have a single process to reach the top. When you hold power at the top of your hierarchy of value, control is all that matters. Power is all.

The merit base for Jane may have been in her ability to improve the company’s products meticulously, but Jim’s was to blackmail his boss. Thus, creative merit and destructive

merit become equivalent skills. One rises through hard, meaningful work while the other rises through nasty, manipulative bullshit. But both are rewarded equally. Jane and Jim both get keys to the executive washroom.

Not good.

So what are the signs that a venture is moving into a Scylla situation?

1. Money/Profitability becomes everyone's purported focus. Profit is the great smokescreen that hides malevolence. If we don't make money, we all lose our jobs. So to secure our jobs, let's make the most money possible. A simple argument with a hole the size of the Grand Canyon inside, it shuts us up pretty quickly. No one wants to be a dilettante and cost people their livelihoods.

2. Multiple layers of Authority. The more bosses there are, the more power is in play. The more power jockeying, the sooner the domain morphs into a power-based hierarchy.

3. Concentrated or Amorphous Authority. The single charismatic

authoritarian savior of operation is a fallacy. Steve Jobs' mythos is a lie.

We all want to believe someone will come along and; make our dreams come true, or take care of us, or shield us from the difficulties of our creative and commercial lives.

No such person exists.

Anyone who claims to be someone who will do that for you is manipulating you. You will be giving away far more than what is on offer.

But don't forget you are complicit too in this drama. If you didn't demand certainty, someone to tell you what to do so you don't have to think it through yourself, the authoritarian would not find the traction he or she needs to climb into dominant idolatry.

Likewise, when no one is in charge, when people tell you they'll have to run it up the flag pole with the "powers that be," you're inside the tyranny of the committee. This amorphous committee holds on to power by never giving up a

single target. Everyone on the board has plausible deniability and when no one responsible person calls the shots, lookout.

4. Results Trump Process. When the focus of the operation shifts into quarterly profit estimates instead of leveling up the work to enthrall and enlighten, it's time to take a breath and refresh the system.

The modern-day Scylla does not devour flesh and bone. What it does is far worse. It eats away at our ability to create a meaningful life. It devours souls.

THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN,
PART TWO

If the tyrannically ordered Scylla system represents one divergent path away from our targeted goal, what would happen if we veered in the other direction? What's the possible chaotic Charybdis event for our nascent publishing platform?

From *The Odyssey*, we know that Charybdis is a whirlpool, a vortex that pulls ships beneath the surface, into the underworld darkness. Once the vessel veers into the monster's arena, it begins to circle its drain.

Those on board now have to contend with the gradient of fear. And all their internal anxieties externalize. With the first suck into the Charybdis orbit, inherent uncertainty, doubt, skepticism, timidity, apprehension, worry, dread, and anxiety transform into outward fear, leading to panic, even in extreme cases, devolving into a fate worse than death.

And the hierarchy of satisfied needs for each individual tumbles with it. Those self-actualizing now find themselves concerned about third-party validation. Those satisfying esteem worry about their position inside of their nuclear family. Those expressing their love for their work find themselves now anxious about their security. And those focused on financial security now fear they won't be able to make ends meet.

What if, by staying on this ship, they can't take care of their fundamental physiological needs?

Now is the time all hands are needed on deck to right the ship. But when each individual is experiencing a private threat to their well-being, saving the ship moves to the bottom of everyone's priority list. Finding a viable exit strategy consumes the individual. While pretending to lend a hand, each traveler's internal focus is getting the hell off the ship.

The value at the top of the ship's hierarchy is meaningless when the passengers are under mortal threat. The seemingly calm before the crash of chaos, a traumatic state of being when our actions do not match our internal values, is the result. Everyone on board is in the state of cognitive dissonance—chaos reigns as the probability that the ship will pull

itself out of Charybdis' current approaches zero.

If that's what's going on abstractly, how would this "everyone for themselves" event manifest for us?

Let's say we hold a monstrous grip on our "The Work Above All Else" value at the top of our publishing platform's hierarchy. We work, and we work, and we work, bringing all of our Story Grid psycho-technologies to bear on every publishing project we commit. We invest in every project until we've done everything we possibly can to ensure it is worthy of the masterworks of its genre.

And in the service of our ideal, we refuse to allow a single authoritarian figure to have the final say on the project. All of us must sign off on the story before we're put it up on our stage.

After all, if we hold each person's subjective point of view precious, each person in the arena should weigh in on each project, no?

No.

If we choose to let no single orderly system reign because we're terrified of tyranny, chaos ensues. All opinions, no matter how misinformed or misaligned with the core methodologies we're working to improve, would matter. That's an example of what I mean by confusing equal opportunity with equality of outcome.

Some of us will have skills the others haven't acquired yet. So those with the most skills should have more significant decision-making responsibility. But the steps necessary to reach that level of expertise must be transparent, rational, and reasonable for all concerned. Attaining the position of trust is an equal opportunity proposition. But whether or not someone will make it to that level is dependent upon the quality of her/his work. And their integrity.

Have they earned that position of authority? Have they sacrificed in ways that compel them to hold the value at the top of the pyramid sacrosanct? Are they wise? Can we trust them? Have they said what they are going to do and then have they done it? Are they open to criticism but committed to rational discourse? If we were in trouble, would they be our first call?

If we refused to order our system by putting our trust in such people for fear of alienating one of our less-accomplished members, we'd publish very few titles. Someone in our group won't like something about every single project we wish to bring into the world. If there is not an order to the choosing of the works we publish, there will be no possibility for the ship to avoid Charybdis.

If we don't publish, we don't generate

revenue. If we don't generate revenue, we won't have fuel to satisfy as many of our hierarchies of needs as possible. If our publishing platform can't meet our individual needs, it will be meaningless as a strategy for all of us to focus on our work.

Remember that utopias are perfect societies, impossible to actualize on Earth.

We need to shoot to be perfectly imperfect. We will embrace idiosyncrasy. When one woman describes another's idea of a "masterwork" as a hot mess that technically "works," we've hit nirvana.

That's what we're going for—individual subjective passion constrained by our methodology, as it defines "working." We don't have to agree, and we shouldn't all agree. We're investing in the methodology. If the method, and it operates on many different levels of analysis, is sound and it tells us a story "works," that's our criteria. Not one person's subjective interpretation or an entire group's.

If we're on the straight and narrow path, avoiding the outstretched limbs of Scylla and the undertow pull of Charybdis, we won't all agree on much...except the efficacy of the methodology. And we'll question that too. We'll tighten it along the way!

Can you see now why the majority of publishing operations devolve into Scylla

systems? Charybdis feasts on indecisive and disorderly actions. Its undertow sucks them in, the passengers jump ship, and then the whole thing goes under, with the remains picked over by the five-legged monolith as more bricks in its wall.

Order, while extremely susceptible to degradation into tyranny, brings relief from anxieties about our fundamental needs. It gives us a level of security. As long as we abide by the established Order's demands, we'll be able to put food on the table, a roof over our heads, and be considered a valuable member of society.

Order, in and of itself, is not evil.

Chaos, in and of itself, is not evil, either.

We need to build an orderly publishing platform that allows for a diversity of individuals within its ecosystem the freedom to question and refresh its systems.

We need to walk the line between order and chaos. And when we inevitably misstep and move too close to Scylla or feel the undertow of Charybdis, someone has to speak up.

That someone is you, Neo.

ANALYZE

Let's get to brass tacks. We're looking to create a new book publishing paradigm, a story platform that has a dominant and inherent "why."

Intent on applying and expanding a story-quality-enhancing methodology called *The Story Grid*, the goal for this platform is to aim to create masterwork-level stories across all genres. While we'll pay close attention to the commercial imperative, the value at the top of our hierarchy is "the work."

The most challenging element of this ethos will be to remember that what is most important are the creations...and not the creators. The writer, the editor, and the publisher must serve the creations. It will be hard to put our egos aside, to temper our ambitions, to not fall in love with ourselves too much. When in doubt, think of the work as a

child. We all know it is the child, a bundle of potential, that needs our most concentrated focus. We have to sacrifice for our children.

In times of inevitable future stress, we will abide by that value we conceived as our purpose in this leisurely “magic wand thinking” period. We’ll walk the narrow path we’ve set out to follow before we’ve published a single title, even if that means we must accept insolubility.

As Seth Godin says, “this might not work.” That’s more than okay. If it doesn’t work this time, we’ll tweak it and try again.

Let’s break it down a bit more. What do we mean by the commercial imperative, and how do we pay attention to it? There are two parts.

I. The necessity of income is the first component of the commercial imperative.

It is necessary to create a sustainable level of income to meet the fundamental needs of the Story Grid Universe membership and to support the resiliency of the operation. If no money is coming in, none of us can afford to dedicate ourselves to the “work.” If we burn through all of the revenue after each publication, we will

not be able to save for the unavoidable rainy day when our work proves commercially disappointing.

2. The necessity to ship is the second component of the commercial imperative.

Hoarding our work to protect ourselves from criticism and disappointment is antithetical to our mission. As the “why” of our work is to create stories that entertain and enlighten, they must enter the open market. The work must be shared as widely as possible so it can be allowed to live a life of its own.

The marketplace isn't just about money. It's about courage. Since we'll need a critical mass of revenue and grit to keep moving forward, we must enter the competitive commercial arena.

Here's some game-changing good news to temper our nerves about competing with the five-legged monolith and the extraordinarily explosive island of misfit self-publishing.

On November 19, 2007, the barriers to entry into the confined story search space, the pool of potential titles from which readers can choose, crumbled. On that day, the now formidable Amazon.com made story

distribution virtually free. Amazon's launch of its Kindle technology and its remarkable commitment to spreading stories at an irresistible price point was the disruptive Big Bang of a brand-new competitive paradigm.

Book publishing entered the era of abundance. It's still kicking and screaming about it.

Twelve years and forty-two-days later, the idea that having one's title on a bookstore bookshelf as the only means to reach inquiring readers is absurd. Online book sales (hard copy, e-book, and audio) account for over half of the revenue the Big Five takes in each year. As for self-publishing, the ninetieth percentile percentage across all genres for online sales is the norm.

What was once expensive and scarce—bookstore shelf space—is now for all intents and purposes free and infinite. The traditional, tightly ordered environment is now an explosively chaotic landscape awash in an endless variety of stories.

Which begs the question, if anyone can release their story into this arena—and anyone can with a marginal personal cost—how can a publishing operation break through the noise?

Let's first eliminate what used to work in the traditional scarcity environment.

1. Advertising sizzle won't work.

With thousands upon thousands of media channels, advertising is prohibitively expensive. A full-page advertisement or radio campaign anywhere won't be seen by a critical mass of people. It is a poor use of capital.

2. Broadening the appeal of a story won't work.

If the story is for everyone, it will not connect with anyone.

3. Free publicity and promotion on large media outlets won't work.

There's only one Oprah, and she's too busy to make your dreams come true. All of the others do not move the sales needle so kowtowing to their desires is fruitless.

4. Intelligentsia book reviews won't work.

There are fewer and fewer book review outlets, and those still viable have little of the cultural power they once did.

Plus book reviews have small space for reviewing genre-specific titles, so genre readers don't even look at them anymore.

5. Size, trying to own “market share,” is unsustainable in the abundance paradigm.

The larger a traditional publisher gets, the more revenue it must generate to cover its expanding overhead. Publishers can't buy a locked ownership stake in an uncontrollable exponentially growing marketplace like they could in the scarcity era. And if a publisher's brand, its “why,” is unknown to avid readers, all of the value-added distribution power it had when retail bookstore chains controlled the search space is for naught. The more sales move online, the less power the Big Five have.

What could work in the abundance environment?

I. Begin with the obvious. Focus on Genre.

Genre is not a four-letter word.
Embrace the micro-communities
dedicated to finding the next big thing
for their tribe.

2. Tightening the appeal of the story could work.

The more specific the story, the higher
the probability it embeds universality.
Narrowing the narrative makes it stand
out from everything else, making it
easier for genre fans to find. If it's easy
to find, it's easy to spread.

3. Ignoring traditional publicity and promotional outlets might work.

Focus on reader exposure, not publicity
or social media exposure. Find ten
thousand readers willing to give your
story a chance and call your marketing
day over. If the work doesn't catch on
after ten thousand exposures, pushing
it to ten thousand more won't help. Let
it go.

4. Not worrying about book reviews from famous publications might work.

The less time spent worrying about what critics think, the more time can be spent finding real readers. Don't equate a lousy review with failure and a complimentary review with success. Those results are not only ephemeral, but they're also a trap to keep the creator from creating more work. Ignore and disengage.

5. Keeping the moving parts inside of the operation to a minimum and making “skin in the game” the means to earn one’s financial reward could work.

No one should be doing a “job.” No one is entitled to a salary and benefits just for showing up and doing what the boss tells them to. Let's be professionals and leave the guarantees and certainty searches for amateurs. This might not sell. So what? We're learning and getting better, getting closer to a work that might sell later on. We've got to swing the bat.

Everyone in the community must make a personal sacrifice as proof of their seriousness to our mission. No one gets

in for free. Loss aversion is real, so if everyone comes into the arena at a “loss,” they will work harder to recover and exceed their investment. When you get in for free, you get exactly what you paid...nothing.

Geez, that’s a lot to remember. Is there just one thing we can home in on if we want to stand out in this brave new publishing world of abundance? What’s the single strategy that distills all of the micro-tactics? What value can we default to when we get confused?

The quality of the work.

The closer we can move our stories into the realm of the masterworks of the genre, the better chance we’ll have to signal our presence to the most discerning readers.

Thankfully, we’ve already built a methodology to level up our work. We make the method better by teaching it and learning what’s vague, fixing that, and carrying on. The better the methodology, the better the work, the better the work, the more probable a dedicated readership will embrace it. If readers welcome it, revenue streams into the universe. If they don’t, we try again.

FORMALIZE

What form will this all take? What would it look like if someone forced us to pull out a piece of paper and sketch it out for them?

Let's define what the piece of paper would be first.

It's the entire realm of stories. The five-legged monolith lives here. So does the ever-expanding island of misfit self-publishing. Every story ever written or dreamed up inside our minds plus every tale not yet told is on this piece of paper too. The single sheet of paper represents the entire story cosmos, a space that dwarfs everything we know about the size of the universe of matter. It's the cosmos of what matters.

The story cosmos is the most combinatorially explosive search space imaginable.

It's impossible not to lose your bearings here.

Let's first divide this cosmos into two. Ninety-nine point nine, nine, nine, nine, nine percent (likelier even more substantial than that) of the piece of paper will represent all of the stories imagined by all of the individuals, throughout the history of narrative cognition, never communicated. These are everyone's "works-in-progress," destined to fall into this sad pile of untold tales.

But there is a tiny spec, the size of an atom on that paper too. This spec represents all of the stories, throughout the history of narrative cognition, that performed. They were either shared around a campfire, acted out on a stage, filmed and then projected, or written on paper.

Let's focus on that spec on the paper. Let's enlarge it to the size of a new piece of paper, a power of ten close up inside the infinite untold story cosmos that surrounds it.

Before we schematize the truth about this "stories told" piece of paper right now, let's look at what was true up until November 19, 2007. Context is everything.

Before the release of the Kindle, performance space, that is the stages where stories spread, was in short supply. To hear or read a story, we all had to travel. We had to

tune in at a specific time and place to listen or watch a show. We had to go to the theater. We had to go to the movies. We had to go to the bookstore.

And all of these stories were pre-screened. The owners of the performance spaces carved out what they deemed “unworthy” and “stories that send the wrong message” for us. People we didn’t know chose what we got to see, listen to, or read. This arena was a tightly walled garden, incredibly ordered, and challenging to gain entry. Oddly, none of us understood why one story appeared on stage while another didn’t. When we questioned the walled garden’s gatekeepers to explain how they chose stories, the “talent” paradigm was born as explanation.

One had talent or one didn’t, and there it was, an ill-defined explanation par excellence. Tastemakers, self-defined judges of talent, capable of financing performance spaces reigned.

At first, there were hundreds of tastemakers and performance spaces, and then, larger business entities equivalent to the likes of Standard Oil and United States Steel subsumed them. With limited opportunities for people to watch, listen, or read, the market tightened. It became more and more finite. Performance stages became scarce.

Scarcity is a zero-sum game. And zero-sum games devolve into power hierarchies. The more you own, the larger the slice of the limited pie you can eat. Reducing expenses while increasing market share is the winning strategy—less money out, more money in wins the game. Size and efficiency (meaning the lowest cost per unit sold) require strict order.

Let's visualize this with our schematic.

The “stories told” piece of paper began about a thousand years ago when printing technology started somewhere in the far east. For nine hundred odd years, it evolved into a bunch of little local blips, small studios, theaters, radio stations, and publishing companies excited about stories all over the world. The blips built performance spaces, put up shows, and hoped that what they found entertaining and enlightening would be similar to what the general public would find valuable too.

Over time, quantitative analysts discovered the scarcity inherent in stories. And like the brilliant monopolist John D. Rockefeller and his ilk, these opportunists began to assemble media companies. By the turn of the twentieth century, all of those blips assembled into book publishing's six-legged monolithic oligarchy. (It turned into five only very recently). Bookstore retailing followed a parallel path, and together

the publishers and the most potent booksellers built a citadel within a citadel that was virtually impregnable to ambitious storytellers. Unless of course, they had “talent,” whatever that was.

The business became so powerful that the names of the publishers faded into readers’ minds. There was no distinction between one from the other. Thus, the six legs formed into one. The only way on stage was through their system. All of the legs spoke with one another, respectfully, and according to the justice department, they conspired with one another to maintain their hegemony.

Out of the early potential-filled chaos of publishing’s past when individuals built small performance spaces for their favorite stories arose a tightly ordered tyranny controlled by six multinational corporations, now five.

Meanwhile, some of those deemed “untalented” refused to accept their fate. And a smallish industry of “pay for play” publishers rose to service these malcontents. This arena came to be known derogatorily as self-publishing. The booksellers, in league with the big publishers, turned their noses up at these offerings.

While one could technically produce a copy of one’s book to show interested parties at cocktail parties and such, the work was

invisible on the culturally endorsed stages. No right-minded bookseller stocked it. The stigma of an “untalented” label stamped on one’s being, like the length of one’s nose, dissuaded the vast majority of the rejected from self-publishing.

So the chaotic blips of passionate story lovers building mini-stages after the birth of printing processes coalesced into a tightly ordered tyranny by the turn of the twentieth century. Big publishing bought up the little blips to dominate the scarcity-controlled marketplace. The blips are the brick-like imprints that make up their walls.

Which brings us up to November 19, 2007. What happened then?

The scarcity model blew up. The tight order of the Big Six wobbled, so it consolidated yet again to form the current Big Five.

As the monolith tightened its defensive perimeter, that tiny pre-2007 self-publishing spec on the paper began to expand. The untalented seized the day (with the self-serving Amazon.com cheering and enabling them like gold-rush suppliers to prospectors). Amazon offered hungry genre lovers, those who gave up on going to bookstores long ago, lots of all-you-can-eat specials and the island of misfit self-publishing exploded. A bit of a misnomer, Amazon is the indispensable enabler for these

misfits and brazenly shaves more and more of the revenue from them as its power grows. After all, Levi Strauss was the big Gold Rush winner, not those who “struck it rich.”

Now the five-legged monolith pales in comparison to the size of self-publishing. And it’s been doubling down on its talent paradigm ever since, refusing to compete with the uncouth monster at the price point. The Big Five titles are inherently better than the self-publishing dross, they maintain, simply because they have the best pickers of the product—what are called editors.

Which brings us up to the present time.

While generations of storytellers continue to believe the Big Five “talent” story, seeds of doubt have taken root. The younger generations, who distrust anything they’re supposed to accept as “the way things are” will have none of it. And no wonder.

It just doesn’t make any sense. The Big Five gatekeepers refuse to explain what sort of test they use to determine if a writer is talented or if her story is worthy of their colophon. Why won’t they? Either they don’t have any method, or they’re keeping their super-secret talent detecting MRI machines under wraps. Neither of those explanations induces confidence in their ecosystem.

Storytellers are also tired of the chaotic

“everyone’s worthy, pay for play,” paradigm too. Come on, 99 percent of the titles published today aren’t entertaining, and they’re certainly not enlightening. That goes for the Big Five stuff too. The only force gaining value from that system are the owners of the technology. They empower the disenfranchised to put their work on stage. Then they encourage them to sell themselves out to everyone they’ve ever known to support them by buying a copy of the work. Guess who benefits the most from that arrangement? The enabler who owns the performance space. The technology doesn’t care about the story. It merely wants to own the search space and let the stories sort themselves out.

Just as the chaos of early book publishing formed into the tyranny of corporate ownership, so could the chaos of self-publishing coalesce into a tyranny of infinite undifferentiated choices... all owned by a single global monopoly. It’s probably already formed.

So what’s a poor girl or boy to do?

Tyrannical order on one side, crypto-tyrannical chaos on the other.

We face *The Odyssey’s* Scylla and Charybdis.

We need to form another way, an

alternative universal vessel that bifurcates these two forces. So let's do that.

The Story Grid Universe, a middle path with a protective force field around it, is our vessel. It's naturally been coming together for years in the “stories never told” end of the story cosmos.

It's time we move it into the “stories told” arena.

What will be inside of the Story Grid Universe?

We need a dynamic system—two parts that feed back into one another—a means for the space to grow.

When one enters this universe, the first stop is Story Grid's Planet Dojo, the place where everything we hold dear is taught and practiced.

Planet Dojo is where we learn how stories work and how we work to make them work. It's where we learn story craft and where we keep adding more and more layers of understanding and clarity to the analytic story grid methodology.

There, we work our stories with mentors. Our mentors are those who've been here longer than we have. They stoically invest themselves in our work with the same intensity and commitment to our work as we have. Over

time, from one clearly defined level to the next and on upward, we create a story that works.

Now it's time to put our story on stage, to let it live a life of its own. We take our work and move on to Story Grid Universe's sister system, Planet Performance. This planet is nothing like Broadway. There is no such thing as a one-night-only flop. There are multiple performance spaces here, and each work runs forever, no matter how large an audience it draws. Once the work is on its feet, it runs.

We head back to Planet Dojo and begin the next project, with a new lens of experience to bring to our work. We now mentor others who were like we once were. We seek advice from next-level mentors who have multiple works in performance. Not just one. Our goal is evident at every level. Raise our craft a little higher with each cycle while refreshing the methodology with any new insights we have along the way—the work above all else.

Planet Dojo to Planet Performance and back again will be our dynamic system. Story Grid University to Story Grid Publishing and back again.

But what about the commercial imperative? How do we create a virtual financial engine that will fund this process?

We must take our analysis and our formulation and mechanize them in such a

way to avoid the rise of a tightly ordered tyranny so we prevent the fragmenting suck of chaos.

The Story Grid Universe must navigate between Scylla and Charybdis with an engine that maintains the perfect velocity through time.

MECHANIZE

We've formed our dynamic system. Our first stop inside the Story Grid Universe is Planet Dojo, the home of Story Grid University. We'll work there until we've achieved a critical craft level with one of our projects. We'll then take that work and move to Planet Performance, Story Grid Publishing. Our editor mentor meets us there and helps us position the work for its core audience. She oversees the creation of the ancillary materials (cover image, back cover copy, and meta-data for third-party distribution networks). Once the work is ready for its debut, we hit the publish button. Then you hug it out with your editor and catch the next flight back to Planet Dojo to begin anew.

Cool.

But what's underneath the hood of our

spacecraft? What's the engine and what's its power source? What drives how Storygridders can level up? How can Storygridders build a functioning life inside this universe? Is that even possible? When will it happen?

Where is the money? How is it distributed?

To avoid Scylla and Charybdis, we need to make sure everyone understands how we'll solve the commercial imperative. Transparency is key. No one wants to work on Maggie's Farm. Not even Maggie.

Money comes into the Story Grid Universe virtual operating engine in many different ways. But there are two central fueling stations. One station is on Planet Dojo; the other is on Planet Performance. We get the fuel on Planet Dojo to fly to Planet Performance and fuel from Planet Performance to head back again.

Here are the fuel systems we've already built for Story Grid University (Planet Dojo):

1. Live Training Events

For net revenue generated by live Story Grid University events taught and produced by Shawn Coyne and Tim Grahl, Story Grid Universe LLC retains the funds. Coyne and Grahl are the sole shareholders of Story Grid

Universe LLC. Together, with their capital, they've constructed the gas station, the gas pumps, and all of the signs on the space causeway to direct people to Planet Dojo's existence. Coyne and Grahl also broke ground and have been building out Planet Performance.

After five years of two guys meeting on the weekend to build something new, it's time for Planet Performance to come online. The Live Training Event revenue stream repays and compensates Story Grid's pioneers and enables them to invest more of their time creating new systems and order to hold the work above all else.

2. Online Courses

For online courses, which include ancillary support instruction from Story Grid Certified Editors, Story Grid Universe LLC retains eighty-five percent (85%) of gross revenue. It pays all expenses associated with the launch and maintenance of the forums and technology. Story Grid Certified Editors who contribute to the forums and conference calls inherent in each course split fifteen percent (15%) of the gross revenue. Thus, the larger the

group of students, the higher the compensation. Story Grid Certified Editors, who also receive lifetime admission to Story Grid events, are paid for their contributions. Fuel moves from this dojo revenue stream back to the SGCEs who've put "skin in the game." The larger the dojo, the more fuel to the SGCEs.

We offer one-on-one training for individual students to hire Story Grid Certified Editors as their mentors for particular classes. One hundred percent (100%) of revenue for these services are passed on to the Story Grid Certified Editors. More fuel for our SGCEs to keep them leveling up.

Any future revenue streams that evolve at Story Grid University shall split in the same spirit as above. No one will work on behalf of Story Grid University without being compensated. Story Grid Universe LLC needs fuel to maintain and invest while the SGCEs need more fuel to eliminate financial distractions that have nothing to do with their work.

Here are the fuel systems we've already built for Story Grid Publishing (Planet Performance):

I. Story Grid Publishing Guild Subscription Revenue

Story Grid Publishing has five publication channels and offers annual guild subscriptions to its entire program to its membership in multiple formats.

Story Grid Universe LLC will cover all costs for producing and releasing the works. There will be no charge to creators, no “pay for play,” for Story Grid Publication.

The nonfiction channels are Planet Dojo derived titles that level up the Story Grid Methodology, how we evaluate the work. Written by Story Grid Certified Editors and by the founders, they are:

- **Story Grid Beats** (high-resolution analysis of micro-story concepts)
- **Story Grid Globals** (high-resolution analysis of macro-story concepts)
- **Story Grid Masterworks** (high-resolution analysis of the titles at the top of genre pyramids)
- **Story Grid Contenders** (high-resolution analysis of Story Grid Editions titles)

Our fiction channel is **Story Grid Editions**.

Sponsored and edited by Story Grid Certified Editors, or by one of the founders, they are novels that meet Story Grid's threshold standards for publication. Anyone can write them, but they must attain a contender status.

Subscription revenue will first offset production costs, which will replenish the fuel tanks for the next year's investment. If the subscription base proves larger than expenses, all revenue after that splits as follows:

That publication year's writers divide 50% of the "in the black" pool money. The editors of the works cut 10% of the "in the black" pool money. And Story Grid Universe LLC retains 40% of the "in the black" pool money.

2. Commercial Marketplace Revenue.

All other revenue from sales at amazon.com, storygrid.com, etc. splits in the same proportions as profit generated from the subscription model: The writers retain 50%, the editors retain 10%, and Story Grid Universe LLC retains 40%.

These four revenue streams will provide the fuel necessary to move all of our missions forward. Writers and editors orbiting inside the

Story Grid Universe's Planet Dojo and Planet Performance, all leveling up their craft with eyes wide open, will be able to focus on the work rather than being his or her own publisher.

As the Story Grid methodology levels up and attracts more Storygridders, our virtual engine will grow ever more powerful. It will provide more fuel for more publishing, more dojo offerings, more work.

What is it powering exactly? It's empowering all of us to get better at telling stories. It's providing us the freedom to practice our craft. To get in our chairs, do our work, and get better every day. The work must be the value at the top of the hierarchy. Not the power or the money.

There is nothing wrong with being powerful and wealthy per se. But the power and the wealth need to serve a higher value, a value that has nothing to do with a person's state of being right now. Instead, the value symbolizes a means to ascend to something more meaningful. Those dangerous forces (power and money) have to kowtow to the work, a means to an end that keeps the channel to meaning and purpose wide open.

The Story Grid Universe is the place for those willing the sacrifice their old Resistance-plagued selves for their formidable Neo-selves,

beings dedicated to leveling up their craft. If enough of us do that, there is a much higher probability that we'll help create timeless stories that entertain and enlighten, contenders that stand alongside the masterworks.

OUR MISSION

Inside the vast and ever-expanding, meta-physical Story cosmos, a tiny spec of universal “what matters,” came online on September 19, 2014.

In its first five years of life, the Story Grid methodology grew from a bi-weekly blog post to a book, to a podcast, to a course, to a certification program, and then into a sister podcast founded by its earliest adopters. These forces then converged into an autopoietic Planet Dojo, an arena for dedicated story nerds intent on leveling up their craft.

In the years to come, pilgrims from Planet Dojo will travel to a freshly formed Planet Performance. They’ll acclimate their children to the planet by providing them the supplies they’ll need to attract, entertain, and enlighten a crowd desperate for a well-told tale. Then the pilgrims will give their children a hearty hug,

climb back in their spacecraft and leave them behind.

It's back to Planet Dojo for them to conceive another child. And when that child's ready to perform, they'll do it all over again.

Over time, the pilgrims will continue to adore all of their children, even the ones with few listeners. But they'll understand that the children must find their way. Their children's "success" or "failure" has little to do with their real value. Each creation changes the creator. The process transforms them, making them more empathetic and wiser. Courageously lifting their creations into the story cosmos and then walking away emboldens them, no matter the result.

And so it will go.

With all on guard for encroachment from the five-legged monolith Scylla and the Charybdis inside the deep dark lake, with the creations steering the course, the Story Grid Universe passengers will enact the process that will bring them a meaningful story/life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHAWN COYNE created, developed, and expanded the story analysis and problem-solving methodology The Story Grid throughout his quarter-century-plus book publishing career. A seasoned story editor, book publisher and ghostwriter, Coyne has also co-authored *The Ones Who Hit the Hardest: The Steelers, The Cowboys, the '70s and the Fight For America's Soul* with Chad Millman and *Cognitive Dominance: A Brain Surgeon's Quest to Out-Think Fear* with Mark McLaughlin, M.D. With his friend and editorial client Steven Pressfield, Coyne runs Black Irish Entertainment LLC, publisher of the cult classic book *The War of Art*. With his friend and editorial client Tim Grahl, Coyne oversees the Story Grid Universe, LLC, which includes Story Grid University and Story Grid Publishing.

