



THE USER'S JOURNEY

Storymapping Products That People Love

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CHAPTER 1



Mapping the Story

Making Things Go BOOM!

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Why Story?

4

“You need a road map, a guide, a direction—a line of development leading from beginning to end. You need a story line. If you don’t have one, you’re in trouble.”

—Syd Field,
Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting

In 2004, I presented my year-end documentary film in graduate school to an audience of around 100 people. As soon as the film ended, before the lights went up, one of my classmate’s hands shot up. I will never forget the first words he uttered—they’re etched into my brain.

I can’t believe you made me sit through that. What was the point?

My film was a dud. It had nothing holding it together: no conflict, no climax, and no resolution—ergo, no story. As a result, I failed to engage my audience. I somehow forgot one of the foundational tenets of filmmaking: if you want to engage your audience, your film *must* have a story at its foundation.

A website, software, app, service, or campaign—for brevity’s-sake I’ll use the term *product* for the rest of the book—is similar to a film. They are all things that humans *experience*. Just like with a film, if you want to engage your audience, your product must have a story at its foundation. You can do this by accident like I did when I created films that people loved. (I did have a few of those, I promise.) Or you can map the story with deliberate care and intent like I eventually learned to do, both as a filmmaker and more recently as someone who helps businesses build products that people love.

Making Things Go BOOM!

Vince Gilligan, creator of the television show *Breaking Bad*, knows a thing or two about using story to engage an audience. In this photo (see Figure 1.1), he is seated in front of the story map for Season 4.

TV writers are smart. They map the story out *before* they write a line of dialogue or shoot a single scene. TV shows are large, complex things that are built with large, distributed teams over a long period of time. With so many people, scenes, episodes, and seasons to manage, it’s hard to stay focused on the big picture. Mapping the story on a wall helps TV writers plot a course while keeping the big picture in mind.



FIGURE 1.1
Vince Gilligan, creator
of *Breaking Bad*, in
front of a story map
for season 4.

Mapping the story also helps TV writers build a product that engages an audience by adhering to a millennia-old architecture designed for engagement: a well-crafted story. You'll learn more about story architecture in Chapter 2, but in the meantime, consider this meticulously placed card near the end of the storyline for *Breaking Bad*, Season 4 (see Figure 1.2). This card has one word written on it: "BOOM." If you've seen Season 4 of *Breaking Bad*, you know what this refers to. If you haven't, you can imagine. Mapping the story helps TV writers make things go BOOM. And it will help you, someone who builds products, make things go BOOM as well.

Story is why people tune in and stayed tuned in, whether you're creating a TV show, a movie, or a website. Storymapping is how you make that story happen, whether you're a screenwriter or a product person.



FIGURE 1.2
A close-up of a story
card for *Breaking Bad*.

Storymapping is just what it sounds like: mapping out an intended experience of use for a product, plot point by plot point. This concept of mapping stories is not new. It's something that Aristotle started doing a very long time ago as he sought to understand what it was about Greek dramas that enraptured audiences, so their success could be reproduced. It's something screenwriters have been doing for years. It's something I eventually learned to do for films and more recently with products. And it's something that you can do on your next project or product.

Why Story?

Story is one of the most powerful tools that humans use to understand and communicate with the outside world. Part evolutionary feature, part survival mechanism harking back to Paleolithic times, part communication tool—story powers the human brain. Story-based cognitive function is so powerful that neuroscientists have a term for it when it doesn't work: *dysnarrativia*, the inability to understand or construct stories. Narrative cognition is so central to how humans operate that not having it is debilitating. Like living with amnesia, it is difficult, if not impossible, to function normally. Story, and its underlying architecture, powers the ability to understand what happened in the past, what happens in the moment, or what will happen in the future. It's a framework and a lens with which humans comprehend everything.

Whether you plan for it or not, your customers use their story-driven brains to understand your product and what it's like to use your product. They also use their story-driven brains to tell others about your product. The better the story, the better the experience, the better the word of mouth.

More specifically, when people experience something with a story at its foundation—whether it entails watching a movie, riding a roller-coaster, or using a website—their brains are activated. They are more likely not just to have a *good* experience, but to:

- Remember the experience.
- See value in what was experienced.
- See utility in what they did during that experience.

- Have an easier time doing whatever they were trying to accomplish.
- Want to repeat that experience.

All of this fits under the umbrella of *engagement*.

If you're in the business of building products that engage, it's your job to consider the story that you and your business want your customers to experience. In this book, you will learn how to map that story—or stories—and align everything you and your business do so that it supports that story. For your customer. And your business.

It works for movies, and it will work for you.

NOTE THE OR A STORY VS. STORY

It may look as if I've made a mistake throughout this book by using the word "story" without an article in front of it, i.e., *the story*. It's no mistake. Story is as much of a tool and framework as it is a discipline. Like art. Or science. When I use "story" without the article, I'm talking about story as a tool. For example, I might say "use story to turn data into insights." However, if I refer to "a story" or "the story," I'm referring to the thing you will create and weave throughout your work.