

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

A Strategic Framework for Narrative Building

In this white paper, we present CYOA as both a conceptual framework and a hands-on tool for shaping strategic narratives. It leads users through the core elements of narrative design—purpose, audience, format, resources, research, distribution, and evaluation—while recognizing that real narrative work is rarely a straight line. Instead, CYOA invites an iterative, choose-your-own-path approach that reflects the complexity of cultural ecosystems, and the many different places practitioners may begin.

CYOA began as a prototype developed and presented at the Salzburg Global session on "Creating Futures: Art of Narrative." What emerged during that convening—through dialogue, critique, and collective intelligence—has since grown into a more expansive framework for helping practitioners, cultural institutions, and funders design empathy-driven narrative interventions capable of bridging divides in pluralistic societies.

The authors bring distinct regional and disciplinary expertise from cultural strategy, movement building, organizational leadership, artistic practice, and narrative design. Together, we draw on experiences rooted in diverse geopolitical contexts and methodological traditions, offering perspectives that are distinct yet complementary. This multidimensional vantage point enables us to analyze narrative ecosystems with more nuance and to propose approaches that are both contextually grounded and broadly applicable across movements and regions.

CYOA is a tool designed to guide strategic thinking and create transformative narrative interventions that move us beyond divisions and closer to a collective vision of the world. It is intended for individual practitioners, cultural institutions, and funders interested in developing empathy-driven initiatives that contribute to a more pluralistic society.

As a whole, this white paper offers CYOA as a flexible, adaptable resource that responds to the realities of narrative work in diverse, complex, and shifting landscapes. By integrating theory, practice, and lived expertise, it seeks to equip practitioners, institutions, and funders with tools to design more intentional, empathetic, and impactful narrative strategies.

Key Objectives of the Framework

The narrative intervention and empathy-building framework presented in this white paper seeks to:

- **Strengthen narrative literacy** by helping users recognize the worldviews, values, and assumptions shaping both their own stories and those of their audiences, and how these influence public perception on key issues.
- **Build capacity for strategic narrative practice** by offering a set of principles and steps for designing, implementing, and evaluating narrative interventions.

- **Support empathy-driven approaches** that center listening, relationship-building, and cross-perspective engagement, thereby strengthening audience reach, deepening engagement with flexible audiences, and activating supportive constituencies
- **Advance pluralistic cultural ecosystems** by encouraging narratives that reflect multiple lived experiences and disrupt exclusionary or harmful dominant stories.
- **Provide adaptable tools** that can be used by individuals, small teams, or large institutions pursuing narrative change as part of their social, cultural, or political mission.

The Importance of Empathy-Driven Initiatives in Addressing Division

Around the world, communities are experiencing deepening ideological, cultural, and political divides. These fractures are intensified by narratives that flatten identity, reinforce stereotypes, and obscure the lived realities of marginalized groups—often deliberately instrumentalizing them to generate moral panic and mobilize support for anti-rights and anti-democratic agendas. In this landscape, empathy is not a sentimental aspiration—it is a strategic necessity.

Empathy-driven initiatives create openings for new understanding by:

- Humanizing issues that are often framed as abstract or highly politicized
- Encouraging audiences to see from unfamiliar perspectives
- Building trust across lines of difference
- Supporting dialogue rather than deepening antagonism
- Promoting shared values that can anchor collective action

Narratives built on empathy can shift public attitudes, disrupt harmful norms, and cultivate the conditions for long-term social transformation. CYOA provides a structure for creating these types of stories with greater intention, rigor, reach, and impact.

Current Challenges in Developing Cultural Strategies for Empathy-Driven Narratives

Despite growing interest in narrative change, practitioners and institutions face several recurring challenges:

- **Lack of shared language:** Many people engage in narrative work intuitively, without a common framework to articulate their approach or measure impact. While using the same concepts in the same way is not a precondition for collective action—and contextual nuance and locally rooted terminology should always take precedence over externally imposed frameworks—a shared understanding of key narrative principles can help establish a baseline of alignment. This shared grounding can strengthen collective learning, support community building, and contribute to a common vision of the future.
- **Fragmented cultural ecosystems:** Arts, media, and civic organizations often operate in silos, limiting the potential for coordinated narrative strategies.

- **Limited resources and capacity:** Particularly among grassroots practitioners, narrative work is constrained by funding gaps, staffing limitations, and uneven access to tools or platforms.
- **Dominant narratives with entrenched power:** Harmful or exclusionary stories are often deeply and unconsciously embedded in institutions, requiring sustained, strategic effort to counter or transform.
- **Difficulty evaluating narrative impact:** Measuring shifts in attitudes, norms, and public discourse remains complex, making it challenging for funders and institutions to assess progress to expand support and resources for narrative change initiatives

This white paper responds to these challenges by offering a structured, accessible, and adaptable framework that many narrative actors—individual or institutional—can use to strengthen their practice.

Introduction

In an era of increasing division, narrative power holds the key to shaping our collective future. The stories we tell—how we tell them, through which platforms, and to whom—and the stories we choose not to tell shape our perceptions of one another, our societies, and our possibilities for shared futures. To address the fractures that divide us, it is essential to craft narratives that foster understanding, collaboration, and inclusion. Strengthening this narrative capacity is not only about cultivating empathy; it is also about reinforcing, expanding, and revitalizing the shared values that sustain pluralistic societies. In a moment marked by democratic backsliding and escalating backlash against human rights—particularly for communities whose identities, bodies, or histories place them at the sharpest edges of systemic oppression—intentional narrative design becomes a critical tool for advancing collective resilience and safeguarding an inclusive democratic horizon.

Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) is a strategic framework designed to empower and provide practical tools to individuals, cultural institutions, and funders to develop transformative narrative interventions that transcend division and move us toward a shared, more inclusive vision of the world. Rooted in empathy-driven approaches, CYOA aims to reimagine how we engage with the narratives that define our collective reality. By creating space for diverse perspectives and experiences, CYOA fosters a pluralistic society that values differences while seeking common ground.

Key Terms and Working Definitions

To ensure clarity and shared understanding, it is essential to ground the discussion in key terms and working definitions:

- **Narrative Building:** The intentional creation, shaping, and dissemination of value-driven stories that influence collective understanding of key issues and social cohesion. This does not imply full agreement on all matters but rather cultivates the shared conditions in which principled disagreement can coexist with a firm commitment to human rights and pluralistic democratic values.
- **Transformative Narrative Interventions:** Strategic efforts aimed at challenging and reshaping anti-rights, anti-democratic narratives, often with the goal of dismantling harmful stereotypes and promoting more inclusive, diverse viewpoints and societies.
- **Empathy-Driven Narrative Strategies:** Narrative-centered initiatives that prioritize understanding, connection, and mutual respect, fostering deeper insights into the lives and perspectives of others.
- **Pluralistic Society:** A society that recognizes and celebrates the coexistence of diverse cultural, ethnic, and ideological groups, while actively working toward equity and inclusion.

Overview of CYOA as a Transformative Tool for Narrative Change

At its core, CYOA is a tool for building empathy through the thoughtful construction of narrative interventions that can influence both individual and collective action. By guiding practitioners, institutions, and funders through a structured process of narrative creation, CYOA empowers its users to reimagine and reshape the stories that shape our communities. It challenges hegemonic narrative frameworks that often promote division and individualism, encouraging instead the exploration of multiple perspectives that reflect the richness and complexity of our world.

In doing so, CYOA strengthens the narrative capacities needed to reinforce, expand, and revitalize the shared values essential to pluralistic, rights-respecting societies—values that are increasingly under pressure amid democratic backsliding and growing backlash against the rights of gender-diverse, queer, trans, ethnoracialized, and other marginalized communities.

By cultivating empathy alongside structural understanding, CYOA supports the development of narrative strategies capable of fostering social cohesion and advancing inclusive democratic futures.

Through a combination of storytelling methodologies, strategic thinking, cultural analysis, and monitoring and evaluation techniques, CYOA offers an approach that can be adapted to diverse contexts. Whether used in artistic endeavors, policy advocacy, or community-building initiatives, the tool is designed to cultivate empathy and engage with the deeper values that unite us as human beings.

The Need for Empathy-Driven Narrative Strategies and Interventions within Pluralistic Societies

The need for empathy-driven narrative strategies has never been more urgent. In today's world, our societies are increasingly divided along political, racial, cultural, and economic lines. These divisions are often perpetuated by the narratives we consume and share, narratives that can reinforce stereotypes, marginalize voices, create barriers to understanding, and promote anti-rights, anti-democratic values and societies.

Empathy-driven narrative strategies, such as those outlined in CYOA, offer a powerful antidote to these frameworks. They invite us to step beyond the surface of our differences and engage with the lived experiences of others. By prioritizing empathy in narrative building, we can break down the walls of misunderstanding and begin to weave the fabric of a more inclusive society, one story at a time. This framework is for those who recognize the power of narrative in shaping culture and who are committed to fostering a world where all voices are heard, understood, and valued.

Who This Framework Is For

CYOA is designed for a broad community of practice, including:

- **Individual Practitioners:** Artists, activists, content creators, and all sorts of storytellers who are committed to using their craft as a tool for social change and empathy-building.
- **Cultural Institutions:** Museums, theaters, media organizations, and other cultural bodies that seek to engage diverse audiences and foster dialogue around shared human experiences.
- **Funders:** Individuals and organizations providing resources for narrative initiatives, with an interest in supporting projects that prioritize empathy, inclusivity, and narrative transformation.

Goals and Intended Outcomes of the White Paper

The primary goals of this white paper are:

- To introduce CYOA as a strategic framework that can be used to create narrative interventions that foster empathy and inclusivity.
- To explore the role of narrative strategies in a pluralistic society and the need for initiatives that bridge divides and foster understanding.
- To provide practical insights into how cultural practitioners, institutions, and funders can use CYOA to create and support transformative narrative initiatives.
- To engage readers in a conversation about the role of narrative in shaping social change and to encourage the adoption of more empathy-driven approaches within their respective fields.

A Brief Overview of the Tool

CYOA is structured as a step-by-step guide that allows users to approach narrative-building with intention and clarity. It encourages reflection on the existing narrative landscape in order to challenge, anti-rights narratives and provides pathways for creating more inclusive, human-centered stories. The tool incorporates a range of creative, strategic, and analytical approaches, enabling users to develop customized narratives tailored to their specific context and goals.

Limitations/Qualifications for the Tool

While CYOA offers valuable insights and strategies, it is important to note that it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. The framework is intended to be adaptable to various contexts, but its effectiveness depends on the commitment of its users to embrace a mindset of empathy and collaboration. Additionally, as with any strategic tool, the success of the interventions created

through CYOA will depend on the broader cultural and political environment in which they are deployed.

Moreover, CYOA does not claim to solve all issues of societal division or inequality. It is one of many tools that can contribute to broader efforts for social change, but its impact is contingent on the continued commitment to dialogue, understanding, and action from all involved.

By providing a strategic framework for narrative building, CYOA aims to support a transformative shift in how we approach storytelling — one that prioritizes empathy, inclusivity, and the creation of a shared, pluralistic vision for our collective future.

Introduction to the Framework

"Choose Your Own Adventure" (CYOA) is not just a tool—it is a compass for navigating the complex terrain of narrative building. At its heart, CYOA equips practitioners, institutions, and funders with a structured yet flexible framework for creating stories that foster empathy, deepen understanding, and advance social transformation. By guiding users through reflective and strategic decision-making, it positions narrative work as both intentional and adaptive, enabling interventions that resonate with diverse audiences while remaining grounded in purpose.

Core Principles of the Framework

CYOA is anchored in several core principles:

1. **Empathy as a Foundation:** Every narrative intervention begins with understanding the experiences, values, and needs of your audience.
2. **Intentionality:** Each choice—from story to format, distribution to evaluation—is driven by a clear purpose.
3. **Plurality:** Multiple perspectives and voices are centered to challenge hegemonic narratives and cultivate inclusivity.
4. **Adaptability:** Narrative work is iterative; the framework allows users to start at any point and move through components as clarity emerges.
5. **Strategic Alignment:** Each story, resource, and engagement tactic is coordinated toward a shared vision for cultural and social change.

How the Framework Supports Empathy-Driven Narratives

By guiding users to reflect on purpose, audience, and context, CYOA ensures that narratives are grounded in empathy rather than assumptions. The framework encourages practitioners to:

- Listen deeply to audiences and communities.
- Identify emotional and cultural touchpoints that resonate across diverse groups.
- Build stories that foster dialogue, understanding, and connection, ultimately influencing attitudes, behaviors, and social norms.

Empathy-driven narratives are not accidental—they are intentional interventions. CYOA provides the scaffolding to move beyond surface-level storytelling toward deeper relational impact.

The Relationship Between Strategic Thinking and Social Transformation

CYOA bridges the gap between narrative creativity and strategic action. Social transformation requires more than compelling stories—it requires thoughtful consideration of where stories enter the cultural ecosystem, whom they reach, and how their impact is measured. By linking strategic thinking with narrative design, CYOA transforms stories into tools for change,

connecting intention with measurable outcomes and aligning creative work with broader cultural, social, or political goals.

Introduction to the Prototype Model

The CYOA prototype is designed as a circular, non-linear model—reflecting the reality that narrative work rarely follows a straight path. The model highlights key components:

- **Point of Departure:** Where your story begins.
- **Defining the Story:** The narrative you want to tell and the format it takes.
- **Mapping Resources:** Identifying available assets, capacities, and partnerships.
- **Grounding Insight:** Research and lived experience that informs choices.
- **Planning Distribution:** Ensuring your story reaches its intended audience.
- **Evaluating Impact:** Measuring the influence and outcomes of your intervention.

Users can enter the model at any point, circling through each component iteratively, allowing their narrative strategy to evolve organically while staying coherent and aligned with their goals.

A Step-by-Step Guide to Using the Tool for Crafting Empathy-Driven Narratives

1. **Start at the Point of Departure:** Identify where your narrative journey begins, guided by clarity of purpose and urgency.
2. **Define Your Story and Format:** Choose the narrative and medium that best convey your message and resonate with your intended audience.
3. **Map Available Resources:** Inventory your people, time, spaces, tools, and partnerships to set realistic scope and priorities.
4. **Ground in Research and Insight:** Incorporate community input, audience data, and cultural knowledge to inform narrative choices.
5. **Plan Distribution:** Strategically select channels—digital, institutional, community-based, or unconventional—that ensure your story reaches and engages the intended audience.
6. **Decide on Evaluation Methods:** Identify metrics and qualitative indicators to track effectiveness, learn from results, and refine your strategy.

CYOA is iterative: answers from one step inform the next, and new insights may prompt revisiting earlier choices. This approach allows for flexibility while maintaining alignment with overarching goals. By following this compass, narrative builders can craft interventions that are not only creative but also impactful, actionable, and grounded in empathy.

Point of Departure: Where We Start Our Quest

Every narrative journey begins somewhere. In this framework, we call that the Point of Departure — the moment when clarity around your goals, audience, and context allows you to take your first strategic step.

This section is designed to help practitioners, cultural institutions, and funders ground their narrative work by asking the right departing questions. Choosing a meaningful point of entry requires **centering your intention, deeply understanding your audience, and identifying your narrative tools**. The answers you uncover will guide how you craft, share, and evaluate your stories.

Centering Your Goal

Before deciding where to begin, take a moment to ground yourself in purpose and perspective. Every narrative intervention is rooted in **intention—something you want to shift, affirm, challenge, or inspire in the world**.

Ask yourself:

- What worldview—or set of values—are you trying to broaden or advance? That is, the deep beliefs, assumptions, and norms that shape how people see the world and what they consider normal, desirable, or possible.
- What transformation are you seeking—culturally, socially, politically, or emotionally?

Then, **consider who you need to reach** and interact with to move that vision forward—whether in a small community or across society at large.

Success in narrative work often depends on reaching across a spectrum:

- Activating sympathizers (those already aligned),
- Connecting with the flexible middle (those who are uncertain or persuadable),
- Neutralizing antagonistic narratives (without centering or reinforcing them).

However, **not every person or institution needs to engage all three groups at once**. Movements are most powerful when roles are split, tactics are diversified, and each actor contributes where they are most effective and authentic.

- Some people are skilled at activating sympathizers—using bold, radical language or visionary storytelling to energize those already aligned.
- Others excel at connecting with the flexible middle—bridging gaps, translating values, and creating narratives that invite empathy and understanding.

- Some feel comfortable, even called, to neutralize antagonistic narratives—using humor or satire to disarm, reframing the conversation, creating space for encounter, or de-escalating hostility with unexpected perspectives.

This diversity of narrative roles isn't a weakness—it's a strength. **What matters is coordination and alignment, ensuring that all contributions are grounded in a shared— but not synchronized—sense of purpose.**

Understanding your audience isn't just about strategy—it's about respect. It means listening deeply to people's experiences, and co-crafting stories that meet them where they are, while moving toward a collective vision of what's possible.

By centering goals and clarifying who your narrative intervention is for (or not), you lay the foundation for a narrative initiative that is not only compelling but also aligned, grounded, and transformative—one part of the larger fabric of social change.

Choose Your Point of Departure

Once your purpose is clear, you can **choose your own adventure**. Narrative work is rarely linear. Most practitioners, institutions, or funders don't start with a blank slate—they start with a spark.

Maybe you already have:

- **A powerful story** you're eager to tell.
- **A new grant** for a narrative project.
- **Research** that shows what resonates in your context.
- **A committed audience**, and you're now searching for the right story to engage them.

Your **Point of Departure** is wherever you're most ready to begin.

The **Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA)** framework embraces this reality. It's designed as a **wheel, not a ladder**—which means you can start at any point that feels clear or urgent. Then, you'll move through other components to build a full, strategic plan. These components can be explored in any order, depending on where you're starting, but **they should all be considered** to craft a transformative, actionable narrative strategy.

Wherever you start, the goal is to move through the entire cycle—aligning your purpose, story, audience, tools, and evaluation. This section helps you reflect on each component, starting with the one that's most defined for you, and moving through the others to ensure a **comprehensive narrative intervention**.

→ **Define the Story You Will Tell**

What is the story that can carry your intention into the world? And what is the format that the story should have to reach the intended audience and therefore have the intended impact?

It could be:

- A music video, podcast, mural, short film, meme series, street performance, video game, art exhibit, fanzine, or campaign...

Your narrative format should align with both **what you're trying to convey** and **how your audience experiences and shares culture**. It's not just about choosing an art form—it's about choosing the **emotional and strategic tool** that will allow your message to travel and resonate.

If you already have a story or format in mind, **great**. Let that clarity guide your next steps: audience, distribution, evaluation, and resourcing.

However, if you're still deciding what story to tell, that decision should flow from **available resources, audience insights, and strategic goals**. Ask:

- What kinds of stories feel possible and sustainable given our team, time, reach, networks, and tools?
- What formats are already trusted or valued by the communities we want to reach?
- What emotions or cultural references will open hearts and minds in this context?

Rather than forcing a predetermined idea, **choose from among the options that your reality makes viable—and that your audience is likely to embrace**. The right story is not always the flashiest one; it's the one that meets people where they are and invites them to imagine and build a more empathic society.

→ **Map Your Available Resources**

What do you already have access to that can support this work?

Resources can include:

- Funding
- People (staff, volunteers, collaborators, allies)
- Time
- Physical or digital spaces (venues, platforms, meeting places)
- Creative tools or technical equipment (cameras, software, art supplies)
- Existing infrastructure or institutional support (partnerships, networks, organizational backing)

Being clear about what you have allows you to set a realistic scope and make strategic decisions about what's possible now versus what may need to be developed later. Understanding your resources helps you prioritize actions, ensuring your efforts are sustainable and effective, and that your vision aligns with the assets you can leverage today.

→ **Ground in Research and Insight**

What knowledge will inform your work?

Whether through formal research (focus groups, audience segmentation, message testing, academic literature) or direct experience (community work, listening circles, strategic conversations), insights about your audience should guide every decision—from tone and content to format and distribution.

Research helps ensure you are not replicating ineffective or extractive strategies. It allows you to build on what's already known, ensuring your approach is grounded, relevant, and respectful of the people you seek to engage.

If research or community insight is your strongest starting point, let it shape your storytelling choices, audience engagement strategy, and distribution channels. This grounding will help you craft a narrative that is authentic and impactful, meeting your audience where they are.

→ **Plan Your Distribution**

How will your story reach the people it's meant to move?

Distribution isn't just about visibility—it's about intimacy, access, and alignment with the people you want to engage. Consider:

- Digital platforms (social networks, podcasts, streaming services)
- Cultural institutions (museums, art centers, festivals, libraries)
- Community spaces (schools, faith-based spaces, health centers)
- "Guerrilla" spaces (street art, bathroom doors, SMS chains)

This step ensures that your narrative doesn't just exist—it travels. It meets people where they are, creating points of connection that resonate, spark dialogue, and inspire action.

→ **Decide How You'll Evaluate Impact**

How will you know if your work is making a difference?

Impact doesn't only show up in numbers—it can emerge through stories, shifts in language, or changes in how people engage with an issue. Methods to assess this might include:

- Pre/post survey
- Focus groups or interviews
- Observations of public dialogue
- Narrative tracking over time
- Outcome harvesting models

Knowing what you're measuring or tracking—and why—helps you refine your approach and ensures that your narrative strategy remains responsive and impactful, generating insights that can inform future work.

Keep the Big Picture in Mind

As you navigate your point of departure, remember that each consideration—story, resources, research, distribution strategy, and evaluation plan—is interconnected. The clarity you have in one area will inform and shape how you approach the others. In the end, the process is iterative and flexible. While some aspects may feel more defined, others will evolve as you move through the cycle. Start with the components you have the most clarity on or the least flexibility with and allow those answers to shape how you approach the remaining questions. Know that each choice you make doesn't need to be perfect—it just needs to make the most sense given your current context. This approach allows you to build a strategy that is both practical and grounded, while staying true to your original purpose.

Pick Your Character: Use Cases for Different Types of Practitioners

Individual Practitioners: Tools for storytellers, creatives, and activists

Individual practitioners are typically self-employed and work on a contract or project basis, independent of a single organization. Ranging from creatives to storytellers and activists, they tend to carry multiple roles needed for administration, business, and creative work. Individual practitioners are able to bring authentic lived experience and personal narratives to the public sphere, contributing to narrative shifts. Their proximity to issues on the ground can spark bold new stories or provide a clear vision for the future that transcends a more academic perspective.

However, they are often navigating limited resources, juggling multiple roles without specialized training, and balancing creative work with administrative tasks.

Integrating the tool into practice:

- 1. Organize and structure narrative development.*
- 2. Provides strategies for resource and multi-role management.*
- 3. Acts as a producing tool.*

2–3 real or hypothetical use cases.

1. A visual artist who has been awarded a grant to work cross-culturally.
2. A community arts facilitator working with marginalized groups.
3. A filmmaker commissioned to create work that challenges heteronormativity.

Cultural Institutions: Museums, galleries, theaters, etc.

Cultural institutions engage in the conservation, interpretation, and dissemination of culture. Often mediators of public discourse, cultural institutes have the agency to encourage pluralist narratives. Narrative change can be implemented in institutional policy and curatorial considerations.

Due to their role in balancing institutional expectations and community needs, there are risks around superficial representation, complicity in harm of communities, extraction of culture for material gain, and the navigation of bureaucratic constraints.

Integrating the tool into practice:

1. A guide for people in relationships to navigate team management.
2. Provides a framework for inclusive and critical curations.

2–3 real or hypothetical use cases.

1. A museum looking to include an exhibition that amplifies indigenous voices.
2. A gallery interested in hosting workshops for silenced artists.

Funders: Philanthropic organizations, grantmakers, and entities that provide resources

Funders shape the cultural landscape in deciding who and which projects receive resources and financial support. Integrating narrative change into grant criteria and funding strategies activates multiple layers of transformation within narrative work. Providing a clear framework also helps funders align with the approaches their grantees are adopting.

However, funders can struggle when measuring narrative-driven impact, can sometimes face gaps in understanding grassroots realities, and are often balancing risk and innovation, which can be detrimental to ensuring longer-term sustainability for projects.

Integrating the tool into practice:

1. Provides a framework to be adapted for grant criteria.
2. Offers tools to bridge the gap between funders and practitioners.
3. Aligns funding strategies with community interests.
4. Provides insight into the different components needed for sustained narrative change efforts.

2–3 real or hypothetical use cases.

1. A funding body looking to increase support for BIPOC artists and storytellers.
2. Grantmakers supporting ecologically informed films.

Case Study | From Practice to Strategy: Naming the Narrative Work Already Happening

Fariba Mosleh and Brunnenpassage Vienna

Fariba Mosleh never set out to become a narrative strategist. As the artistic co-director of Brunnenpassage Vienna, her focus has always been on creating high-quality, socially engaged art that reflects the complexity of society and fosters dialogue. However, when she joined fellow Salzburg Global Fellows at *Creating Futures: Art of Narrative* to discuss this framework, she found language and structure to articulate what she and her team had long been doing intuitively—and uncovered new opportunities to deepen their work with greater intention.

Brunnenpassage is not just an art space. It's a continuously evolving vision. Located in a former market hall in one of Vienna's most socioeconomically and culturally diverse districts, it's an ArtSocialSpace where 400 events per year bring together professional artists and members of civil society to co-create transcultural, cross-genre works with the overall aim to transform the cultural sector. With programs spanning theater, dance, music, film, exhibitions, and discourse, Brunnenpassage centers participation, experimentation, and solidarity—operating under the belief that participation in art and culture is a basic human right, as enshrined in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The established cultural sector of Vienna is still structurally reproducing exclusion which means that a large section of the population is unable to participate in the cultural life of this city, both on and off stage. Brunnenpassage's artistic co/creative productions center on marginalized perspectives, voices and themes. They sustainably aim to contribute to more social justice via eliminating structurally induced invisibility.

Through the lens of this framework, here's how Fariba and her team think about the key components of the wheel:

1. Centering the Goal: What Are You Trying to Shift?

Worldview/Values:

Brunnenpassage seeks to advance a worldview in which art is not a luxury or a privilege, but a shared civic space—a place to foster social cohesion, cultural democracy, and peace. The institution's work is grounded in the belief that diversity, equity, and co-creation are not only desirable but necessary for collective, solidary cultural life.

Transformation Sought:

A structural transformation of the cultural sector: one that centers social justice, recognizes diversity-sensitive practices as core competencies, and moves beyond cosmetic diversity toward systemic inclusion.

2. Understanding the Audience: Who Are You Trying to Reach?

Brunnenpassage focuses on connecting with the **flexible middle**—residents, workers, and visitors in a rapidly changing neighborhood who may not have firm positions on the value of the arts or on social justice, but are open to discovery and dialogue.

Rather than assuming interest, the team uses cross-genre, cross-generational, and multilingual formats to create points of entry for different dialogue groups. A significant part of their communication strategy is dedicated to reaching people who have never entered traditional cultural institutions, using proximity, accessibility, and relevance to make participation possible.

3. Choosing the Point of Departure: What's the Most Defined Starting Point?

For Fariba and her team, the clearest starting point was the story they already tell through their programming:

Brunnenpassage is telling a story in which socially engaged artists and institutions are no longer marginalized at the edges of the cultural sector, but recognized as vital to its future. It's a story where diversity-competent, discrimination-critical artistic and management practices are not treated as symbolic gestures, but valued as core competencies essential to artistic excellence and institutional relevance.

Through the years, a broad section of artistic approaches has been established that builds the foundation of our artistic output. These artistic practices continue to be the subject of experimentation and research as the inclusion of new co-creators and protagonists from marginalised backgrounds results in new aesthetics and practices. Following the expertise among the curators, as well as experience, evaluation, and funding structures, the main focus is performative art, but Brunnenpassage also operates in:

- Performative Arts: theater, dance, performance, deep listening
- Audio-Visual Arts: music, exhibitions, cinema
- Discursive Formats: panels, workshops, community conversations

All of these are co-creative and designed with different levels of possible participation and accessibility.

4. Mapping Resources: What Can You Leverage?

While their financial resources are often under pressure, the Brunnenpassage team has:

- A longstanding public reputation and loyal community
- Access to public and philanthropic funding
- A network of local and EU partners, including Trans Europe Halles, D/Arts, and CPPD
- A skilled team with both legacy knowledge and fresh perspectives

- A huge network of affiliated artists that work across all disciplines, advancing and challenging the core concerns of the Brunnenpassage through their artistic practices
- A deep well of institutional learning, built over 18 years of experimentation, un/learning and adaptation

This mix of tangible and intangible assets allows them to plan realistically and act strategically, even under constrained conditions.

5. Grounding in Insight: What Do You Already Know?

Brunnenpassage is a living research site. Its programming is continuously informed by:

- Team discussions, drawing from both theoretical frameworks and hands-on experience
- Constant neighborhood engagement of diverse protagonists, which provides real-time insight into what resonates
- Ongoing inter/national networks, allowing them to identify trends, anticipate backlash, and stay ahead of performative inclusion practices

Their decision to challenge symbolic diversity and advocate for structural transformation is rooted in both lived experience and observed sectoral dynamics.

6. Planning Distribution: How Will the Story Travel?

Brunnenpassage operates on both the micro and macro levels:

- Micro: Within the institution, through the active involvement of participants and artists. In their immediate neighborhood, through events, partnerships with local businesses and schools, and word-of-mouth.
- Macro: Through different networks like Trans Europe Halles and the partners of the Creative Europe project, which allow their values and models to travel to EU policy spaces, national advocacy platforms, and fellow institutions across Europe.

This two-tiered strategy ensures that local resonance and systemic influence happen in tandem.

7. Evaluating Impact: How Will You Know It's Working?

Evaluation at Brunnenpassage is iterative and participatory:

- Weekly team discussions with curators, operators, and artists
- Attendance tracking and demographic shifts
- Post-program questionnaires

- Regular feedback loops with workshop facilitators, volunteers, visitors, partner institutions, and artists

They see impact not only in numbers, but also in shifts in narrative, trust, participation, and presence—especially among groups historically excluded from cultural institutions.

Final Reflection: From Intuition to Intention

Fariba may not have called her work “narrative strategy” before. But in practice, she has long been crafting and distributing stories that challenge dominant norms—about who art is for, what counts as culture, and how institutions should reflect society.

As a practicing cultural manager who was not previously familiar with narrative strategies and their development, Fariba joined this working group with curiosity. At first, she found it partly challenging to orient herself conceptually and to recognize which narrative strategies were already embedded in her practice—especially when these were framed through unfamiliar labels and concepts. However, the dialogical work within this multi-perspective group enabled her to view and analyze her work through the lens of CYOA. This perspective not only revealed the depth and sophistication already present in her practice—something that even surprised her—but also provided a strong foundation for further strategic development.

Using the narrative strategy framework has allowed her and her team to:

- Name and value what they already do
- Identify the shifts they want to make
- Communicate their purpose more clearly
- Align their programmatic, artistic, and advocacy work

For others working at the intersection of art and justice, this case shows how this framework can be applied to existing work—and how naming that work strategically and systematically can help deepen its impact and broaden its reach.

Recap: The Transformative Potential of CYOA

The CYOA framework positions narrative not simply as communication, but as infrastructure for societal transformation. By centering empathy, intentionality, plurality, and strategic alignment, CYOA offers a practical method for moving beyond polarization and toward a shared, inclusive, and diverse future. It empowers individuals, collectives, and institutions to understand where their stories begin, how those stories travel, and what shifts they aim to create in the world.

In a time when societies are asking how to rebuild trust, foster cohesion, and deepen understanding, CYOA provides a roadmap for doing so—story by story, practice by practice, community by community.

The Broader Impact of Empathy-Driven Narratives

Empathy-driven narratives have the power to:

- Transform public imagination and expand societal notions of what is possible
- Reduce fear-based responses and increase openness to other perspectives
- Strengthen connections across lines of race, class, gender, geography, and ideology
- Support healing in communities impacted by exclusion, violence, or erasure
- Build the cultural conditions that enable human rights-centered policy and advocacy efforts and social movements to succeed

When we shift the stories that shape us, we shift the systems that govern us.

Next Steps for Practitioners, Institutions, and Funders

To move CYOA from framework to field-wide practice, we recommend:

For Practitioners

- Use the CYOA wheel as a guide for designing new projects or assessing existing narrative work.
- Build collaborative cohorts or peer circles and create feedback loops to test and refine the framework.
- Document insights, challenges, and adaptations to continue strengthening the model.

For Cultural Institutions

- Use CYOA to inform program design, community engagement, and curatorial decision-making.
- Adopt empathy-driven practices internally, not just in public-facing work.
- Align organizational values, story choices, and community partnerships with the framework.

For Funders

- Integrate CYOA into grant criteria to support narrative strategies that are intentional, community-rooted, and grounded in empathy.
- Invest in narrative infrastructure—not just one-off projects—to build long-term capacity across the narrative ecosystem.
- Support research and evaluation methods that acknowledge contributive models (as opposed to attribution-based impact metrics) and honor qualitative and relational impact.

Bringing Narrative Strategy Into Action

As the field of narrative change continues to evolve, one of the most urgent challenges is transforming theory into practice. While frameworks like CYOA provide the conceptual grounding for empathy-driven storytelling, practitioners, institutions, and funders often need interactive, hands-on tools to meaningfully apply these ideas in real-world contexts. To meet this need, we recommend expanding this work into a *gaming-based narrative strategy framework*—a dynamic environment where users can experiment, make choices, encounter consequences, and refine their strategic thinking through play.

By translating the CYOA model into a game, teams can move beyond abstraction and actively test how stories travel, how audiences respond, and how narrative interventions ripple across a cultural ecosystem. This approach bridges imagination and implementation, creating a practical, accessible way to strengthen narrative literacy, build shared strategy, and cultivate the real-time decision-making skills required for impactful narrative work.

In other words: the next step for this framework is not just to be *read*—but to be *played*, practiced, experienced, and lived.

Recommendations for Future Development

To strengthen the usability and reach of the CYOA framework, we propose developing:

1. A Narrative Strategy Card Deck

An interactive toolkit for teams, coalitions, and institutions working on narrative infrastructure. The deck would include:

- Point-of-departure prompts
- Audience segmentation cards

- Story format exploration
- Resource-mapping exercises
- Distribution strategy cards
- Evaluation and reflection prompts

This would support workshops, retreats, and team sprints focused on narrative strategy.

2. An Interactive Web-Based Game

A digital tool allowing users to “play through” narrative strategy scenarios.

This game could:

- Help users test different narrative pathways
- Simulate audience reactions and cultural dynamics
- Provide case-based challenges for funders, institutions, or artists
- Offer a guided mode for new practitioners and a sandbox mode for advanced users

The game would embody the very spirit of the CYOA model—choice, consequence, strategy, and imagination.

3. A Facilitator’s Guide and Training Curriculum

Workshops, fellowships, and cohort-based training to deepen field capacity and support cross-sector alignment.

References:

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For further reading on narrative strategy, some useful resources are below:

- [Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy](#)
- [Celestial Navigation: How to Fund Narrative Strategy \(in the US\)](#)
- [Field Guide: Narrative Research Methodologies](#)
- [From Stories to Systems: Using a Narrative Systems Approach to Inform Narrative Change Strategy](#) (read an excerpt [here](#))
- [Notes on a Cultural Strategy for Belonging](#)

More readings available [here](#). Happy browsing!

This white paper was developed by Salzburg Global Fellows who attended the Culture, Arts and Society session on "Creating Futures: Art of Narrative" in April 2025.