

THE EMERGENCE OF NARRATIVE IN “THE SILLY SPIDER MONKEY FIASCO”

by

Trevor Williams

(Under the Direction of Nate Kohn)

ABSTRACT

This paper will investigate the emergence of narrative over the course of sixteen episodes of the sketch comedy program, "The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco." In investigating this emergence, it will analyze how "SSMF" was adapted and furthered the innovative format of the 1970's BBC program, "Monty Python's Flying Circus," by incorporating linking devices to enhance the viewer's satisfaction in watching the show and the creator's enjoyment of constructing it. This study will explore the reasons for the effectiveness of narrative and linking devices in these programs from an informed theoretical background in creative, humor, and narrative theory. Finally, this paper will break down the creative process of the writer in his construction of the SSMF scripts as well as the thesis, itself.

INDEX WORDS: Creative Theory, Humor Theory, Television History

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the cast of *The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco* (Andrew Jedlicka, Ed Mundy, Stephen Hendriks, Laura Jenson, Shelly Stover, Neal Holman, Lauren Dominick, Nora Smith, Angie Wedekind, and Diane Latham) with whom I indulged in my passion for writing television shows. A special dedication is in order for Jessica Sawrey and Diane Latham who helped me edit this paper and to my committee Nate Kohn, Ellie Lester-Roushanzamir, and Andy Kavoori.

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Chapter 1: **Introduction**

SSMF: A brief history

While attending the University of Georgia, from 1998 to 2002, I produced seventeen episodes of a sketch comedy program titled *The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco*. The show was created when my freshman roommate, Travis Holcombe, and I took out a VHS camera and began filming shenanigans around campus, editing them, and airing them on Housing 12, UGA's campus television station.

During the first season of production, Travis and I managed to round up three other guys to help us write and produce our tomfoolery. With few preconceptions about the show's format, the five of us went out and shot what we called "sketches," though they looked more like home videos. Once we had enough of these "sketches" to fill up a thirty-minute time-slot, we edited them together on the same tape and released an episode. That first year, we put together four of these episodes. Though each was rudimentary in production value and structure we did make some improvements. As the show's head writer, the most personally significant of these improvements, was the way we began to link together comedic material from different parts of unrelated sketches. The idea of linking things was not a spontaneous act of genius, but instead an adaptation of another innovative sketch comedy program from years past.

The most revolutionary show, to experiment with a non-linear format in sketch comedy was the 1970's BBC sensation *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. The original *Python* format was a reworking of the traditional "black out" sketch format used by variety shows during the golden

age of television. During these shows a sketch or scenario would be displayed, play out an expanded joke, and then end, only to be followed by a completely different sketch. *Monty Python* expanded on the old variety format, juggling and fragmenting sketches into a non-linear collage. Even more innovative, *Python* found ways to tie these sketches together with recurring comedic elements and clever transitions. Python instantly drew much attention from critics and audiences. In time, the show became almost iconic in its popularity and seemed to set the guidelines for alternative and British humor for the remainder of the 20th century.

My first encounter with *Python* came during the second semester of my freshmen year in college. Until that point, the *Spider Monkey* shows lacked any sort of unifying element, despite the fact that I had sought to bring cohesion to the show in order to distinguish it from other college humor programs. Like the variety shows of the 1950's, the *Spider Monkey* format was one that displayed a series of unrelated sketches. That format changed one night when I was flipping through the channels on my dorm room television. I stumbled over the sketch comedy show on the A&E network of all places. "What is comedy doing on an art network?" I wondered to myself. I had always believed comedy and art to be mutually exclusive. I was soon proven wrong. The show had turned sketch comedy into an art form. *Python* linked sketches together making it difficult to tell when one ended and one began. The show flowed, to me, like a jazz quartet that began playing one song and after a long chaotic jam, found themselves playing another. I found this style fascinating and I sought to mimic it.

Python had an instant influence on me. After seeing the show and studying¹ it for a year, I began incorporating many *Python* tricks into the *Spider Monkey* show. The first full episode that I wrote and produced after being exposed to the *Flying Circus* included clever transitions,

¹ This was possible because of the extensive Python video library at the Vision Video store in downtown Athens, Ga.

running gags, and reoccurring characters. Episode five, “Cancelled,” was a step in a new direction for *SSMF*. In this episode a transition bridged nearly every sketch as the entire show script flowed like a stream of consciousness. Episode 6 also used transitions to tie nearly all sketches and even introduced flashes of a rough story line as a means of tying these sketches together.

Ultimately these episodes were not very funny and did not resonate with most audiences. However, they did mark a new era in the way I approached making these college television shows. I now felt less like a clueless kid running around with a video camera and more like a writer-producer weaving together clever scripts and finding the means to see them through. Season two of *Spider Monkeys* also saw many structural changes to the show’s production mode. We added eight cast members, though we lost three, including Travis, to other interests. The show’s production mode became more organized, as we started following consistent work schedules and shooting sketches by the designation of more detailed scripts.

By season three, the *Spider Monkeys* were beginning to come out of their shell. The cream of the cast had risen to the top, as other “deadbeat” cast members quit, leaving us with a solid troupe of eight. We upgraded our production equipment to digital cameras and an offline editing system. Our show scripts had reached new heights in creativity. The first episode that season “The Silly Survivor Fiasco” capitalized on emulating the format of the popular game show, *Survivor*. Instead of linking from just sketch-to-sketch, in this episode we tied all the sketches together under one overarching “Survivor” theme. But it was not just a gimmick. Because the parody had been pulled off so well, it earned us a rave review in the campus newspaper, *The Red and Black*, and helped give us something of a small following. Again, we used the formula of tying sketches together under one overarching theme in the next episode,

"Homeless for the Holidays," returning to a common setting or "central locale" in between sketches.

The last season-three episode premiered at our student theater, the Tate Center, in front of two hundred plus spectators. With the stakes raised, we had to pay careful attention to the quality of content. The result was an awards show parody, with sharp sketches woven together with an awards-show theme. The episode was so successful, it earned us a national award, itself: the association for higher education cable broadcasters awards for best entertainment program.²

Carrying on the short tradition of producing an episode and premiering it at the student theater, the *Spider Monkeys* honed in our creative and production skills, made season four's episodes our most polished and creative yet. After having launched our website, our following was ever increasing; yet we did not stop pushing ourselves. By that season's last episode, number 14 "old school revenge," we had set out to create our best ever, by taking a large creative leap. It was in that episode that we would abandon the central locale format and instead produce a show that concerned itself with the fate of several characters. We reintroduced "black out" sketches that, as the episode went on, eventually did run into each other in a way that explained their significance by the end of the program. Though not all events tied into one singular plot, the general trajectory of the episode from disjointed sketches to links to some cohesiveness was a new and exiting idea and -oh yes- we did win another award: the AHECT³ award for technical innovation.

By season five, we were a popular college television show, airing on several campuses, nationwide.⁴ Yet, I still had an undying creative thirst to pursue the kind of expansion on our

² See www.ahecta.org

³ www.ahect.org: Yes, this is a different award from the first!

⁴ The Universities of Florida, Georgia, and Massachusetts as well as Rice University, Northern Texas, Georgia Tech, and Georgia State have all aired *Spider Monkey* episodes.

format that we had ended season four with. Episode 15 would attempt to further develop the groundwork that lay in “Old School Revenge.” In this episode, which began like 14, with seemingly scattered “black out” sketches, nearly every element in the show eventually funneled into one climatic scene in which all the characters motives were resolved. It was after completing this episode, “A Wedding Story,” that I realized what our format was evolving into: story telling.

When writing our next show, I really had no conscious intention of writing a central narrative. Instead, I just felt a sort of faith in the notion of following the same creative processes that had gotten us where we were at this point and seeing where it would take us next. My sneaking suspicion was that this process would lead us to making a story. I was right. Episode 16, “Its About Time” was nothing less than a single story about one main character. Every element in the episode eventually tied into this story and helped explain it. By the time it was finished most of our cast members, and especially myself, were a bit baffled about how we had gotten to this point. We had never set out to write stories. None of us had ever written a screenplay. Narrative just seemed to have emerged throughout the progression of our episodes.

When I began writing this paper, understanding where this narrative thread in our episodes came from was my primary creative question. I knew that in order to understand this emergence, I would have to track the show's lineage. Links had always played a crucial role in the evolution of our format, especially since it was emulated from *Python*. I hypothesized that links were the primary force in driving this emerging narrative. But many other questions remained. What exactly were links? How does one go about consciously implementing them into a script? Why do they work? And does using them in fact lead to an emerging narrative in our scripts? And why did audiences like links? (A valid question considering it was the audience's keenness on the show that helped push its evolution.) Why did audiences like narrative? And

how does one go about consciously implementing narrative into a script? The last question was and probably still is the one that I am least qualified to answer. I am not a seasoned narrative scriptwriter, and I certainly do not have the background or knowledge to teach someone how to write a narrative script. What I am an expert on is how to write a *SSMF* script, and how this process, over time, unconsciously led me to writing narrative. It is this process that I will outline, dissect, and expose for its effectiveness in leading us to learning how to write stories from Z to A.

My role on *SSMF*:

For the sake of the paper, it is probably necessary for me to define exactly what my role was on *SSMF*. As I mentioned, I co-created the show, and for all five seasons I served as the *SSMF*'s executive producer. I was also frequently credited as the show's "head writer," and I am the sole credited "screenplay" author of episodes 14, 15, and 16. However, I am not *SSMF*'s only writer and certainly cannot take full credit for the show's authorship. The show writing process, which we will fully examine in chapter 4, designates for two fairly distinct phases.

The first is the group-writing phase, where everyone in the eight-member cast contributes comedic ideas that are to be the basis for our script. The second phase is where I basically take these ideas and weave them into a script. Since everyone has contributed comedic ideas to the script, every cast member receives a writing credit. Since I am the only one who actually types these ideas into a cohesive script, I usually receive a screenplay credit. It is important to understand the precise area in the writing process that I am most concerned with for the sake of understanding the aspects of writing that this paper is concerned with. This paper is an examination of the form in *SSMF*, a dissection not on how comedic ideas are synthesized, but how they can be organized in ways that make them most effective.

Literature review

The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco has not exactly been widely written on in academia, but the study of the creative process and the humor process has. Patricia Keith-Spiegel, Anthony Chapman, Hugh Foot, Melvin Helitzer, Jerry Palmer, and William Lang are amongst the chief humor theorists of our time. Keith-Spiegel summarized eight general principles of humor creation and perception (biological, superiority, incongruity, surprise, ambivalence, release and relief, configurational, and psychoanalytical) in her “Early Concepts of Humor” (1972). Spiegel's eight principles are cited in almost every humor theory study that I have come across. The humor theories that this paper generally deals with are incongruity, configurational, and surprise theory because of their relevance to understanding the effectiveness of various organizational strategies and approaches to writing comedy.

The incongruity and configurational theories of humor have been quite essential in dissecting the function and effectiveness of using linking device. Helitzer's *Comedy Writing Secrets* (1987), Derks and O'Quinn's *The Encyclopedia of Creation* (1999) and creative theorists Arthur Koestler's *The Act of Creation* (1964) all contain extensive writings on incongruity and configuration theories and thus all three authors are cited quite often in chapter two's explanation of links, for their vast understanding of the topic.

Surprise theory is also touched on a bit in the sections of this paper related to the effect of using narrative to enhance comedic material. The way that comedic material is arranged to build and subvert anticipation in the viewer in my opinion is at the heart of the effectiveness of the three-act joke structure, and on a grander scale, the three-act plot utilized by comedic writers to enhance the narrativity and comedic effect of their scripts, simultaneously. Keith-Spiegel's definition of surprise theory is utilized and analyzed in this paper as well as Helitzer's takes on

surprise in *Comedy techniques for writers and performers: the hearts theory of humor writing* (1984).

A less studied theory of humor, "the rule of threes," the idea that things are funnier when they happen in groups of three, frequently appears in this study and was addressed by Jerry Palmer in his book, *The Logic of the Absurd* (1987). William Lang also commented on the rule of threes. His writings on "comedic triplets" in humor are cited in Helitzer's *Comedy techniques for writers and performers* (1984). Like the surprise theory, the rule of threes helps explain the modality of the three-act joke and in doing so bridges the gap between joke telling and narrative structure, serving as a natural liaison to my understanding of narrative theory.

Andrew Horton, Charna Halpern, and Lew Schwarz have written extensive and instructive literature on how to write humor. Their books *Laughing Out Loud* (2000), *Truth in Comedy* (1993), and *The Craft of Writing TV Comedy* (1989) have helped guide writers to create humor by following various guidelines and processes that are based on common practices of contemporary humor writers. These books also incorporate many theoretical principles professed by the above mentioned humor theorists. Though I had never used any of these instructive books to guide my own writing practices I did find them extremely relevant and helpful in understanding my own practices in retrospect. The other primary non-academic book cited in this paper is David Morgan's *Monty Python Speaks!* (1999). This insightful book gathers exclusive interviews with Pythons creators, who take a look back and comment on their work on *Flying Circus*.

There is also a significant overlap in humor and creative theory pioneered by creative theorist Arthur Koestler. Such an overlap is inherently tied to this study. Understanding my own creative process is a large motivation for writing this paper and Koestler's descriptions of how

the human being's creative process works and especially how it generates humor are profoundly useful in implementation and satisfying in recognition. Peter Derks and Karen O'Quinn wrote about this overlap in *The Encyclopedia of Creativity* (1999). The two cited Koestler regularly for his knowledge on the continuity between the creative and humor creation thought processes. The term "bisociation", which is "thinking which connects two or more planes" frequently comes up in Koester's writing and is instrumental in understanding his link between humor and creative theory. (Derks & O'Quinn 845)

I spoke earlier of my quest to understand the link between humor and narrative theory, particularly in seeking to explain why/how narrative structure can enhance comedic content. In trying to answer these questions I turned to various narrative theorists as sources for understanding the make up and effects of narrative structure. Though I introduced myself to the teachings of Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of Folktales* (1968) and Gerald Prince in *Grammar of Stories* (1973), Neal Gabler and Schmolta Rimmon-Kenan were my primary sources in Chapter three's study of the effects of narrative on audiences. Gabler's *New Yorker* article "Losing Ourselves in Narrative" (1998) was relevant because of its extensive musings on the relationship between narrative structure and the way audiences perceive narrative in media and their own lives. Rimmon-Kennan's *Narrative Fiction* (2002) was instrumental in understanding the notion of minimal story, the model by which comedic material can be converted into story in the most primal sense.

In addition to the literature revue, I performed something of a textual analysis on my own output of material, *The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco*: episodes 1-16. I also analyzed *Monty Python's Flying Circus's* episodes (1, 34, and 44). The *Python* episodes that I chose to analyze were landmark episodes that simply defined the format of the program at those particular points

of their creative development (The first *Python* Episode, to give a brief example of the discombobulating style and early use of linking devices, and the latter two episodes, to show their growing incorporation of a single-central narrative). Since this paper's intent was to understand the full development and evolution of *SSMF*'s format and structure, nearly every episode in the series was analyzed in some regard.

As I mentioned before, understanding my creative process is highly important in my research. Because of this importance I have tried to raise my consciousness not only in my writing of comedic scripts that I am currently working on (*SSMF*: Episode 18) but also in the writing of this very paper, itself. It is for this reason that I have kept a journal throughout the creation of this paper and often include entries from it where I see a significant connection to my research. For example here is my first journal entry:

Journal Entry #1

Jan. 21, 2004

Since this is the first journal entry, I suppose that it will have to be quite profound. Instead, I will attempt to generally give an overview of what I will or think I will be investigating for the next couple of months. The purpose of this paper to me is to better understand my own thinking process in relation to how I write comedy and any sort of screenplays at this stage of my development as a writer. I want to investigate what has worked well for me and why. I want to unveil what seems to be a human instinct to turn any sort of group of randomized elements into a story or any tangible thing.

The Structure of This Paper

This paper is designed to understand the emergence of narrative in *The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco*, from the inside out. I have written this paper in a way that reflects my typical

creative process, which will be discussed throughout the paper. This inductive process is one in which scattered elements are introduced, connected on a small scale, and then tied together.

Chapter two will analyze links from a variety of perspectives. In order to understand the emergence of narrative, it is first necessary to understand links. Links were the fundamental building blocks for our later emerging narrative. Had we never begun using linking devices, we'd likely never had adapted a narrative structure later. Chapter two will define what links are, how to implement them, and use humor theory to analyze why links are effective in *Spider Monkey* shows. Chapter two will also use creative theory to analyze why finding links is enjoyable for the writer in order to help me understand my own writing process.

Chapter three will analyze why narrative is effective in *Spider Monkey* shows. Before we can fully explain the emergence of narrative in *SSMF*, we must first explain why narrative was beneficial to us. Chapter three will use narrative theory to analyze why audiences may like narrative in *Spider Monkeys*. Chapter three will also analyze the logic of how narrative can be made to enhance comedic material, by unveiling the inherent similarities in the typical joke-telling and narrative structures.

Chapter four's aim is to demonstrate how narrative was implemented into *SSMF*. This chapter will first review how *SSMF*'s format evolved, from several successive formats designed to link sketches on a large scale, to one central story-line. It will also look at how the cast explored and inserted causality into scripts as a large factor in contributing to the emerging narrative in *SSMF*. Chapter four will demonstrate, from start to finish, how *SSMF*'s cast and I typically goes about creating an *SSMF* show in systematic stages. And finally, Chapter four will suggest ways that we can review future episodes in order to determine whether or not a narrative structure has, in fact, emerged in an episode.

Chapter 2: **Links**

In order to understand the emergence of narrative in *The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco*, it is first necessary to understand the implementation of links or linking devices. It is through the increased implementation of links and linking devices that narrative eventually emerges. One of *SSMF*'s greatest qualities and one of my greatest achievements as *SSMF*'s head writer was the manner in which each show gradually incorporated more and more links. What is a link? Where did I learn how to link? Why do audiences like links? Why do writers like them? How do we implement them? This chapter aims to answer these inquiries.

When I began to study the *Monty Python* format, what really interested me was the way the show was abruptly juxtaposed together in an almost incoherent and inexplicable way. Yet the *Pythons*⁵ found ways to tie things together that would make me say, "ah ha". These moments usually marked some kind of connection between what I had thought to be unrelated comedic elements. I call these connections links. Broadly defined, and in the context of this paper and the two TV shows *Python* and *SSMF*, I shall define links as various techniques employed in a script that calls for a reference to an earlier comedic idea or a transitional sequence that carries one scene or comedic sketch/sequence into the next without disconnect between them. Whereas earlier sketch and variety formats would simply end one sketch and begin the next with no connection between the two, *Python* would have sketches flow one into the next making it difficult to tell where one sketch ended and the next one began.

⁵ Monty Pythons creators: John Cleese, Eric Idle, Graham Chapman, Terry Jones, Terry Gilliam, and Michael Palin.

In this chapter we will look closely at two specific techniques the *Pythons* and *SSMF* used to apply links: (1) by embedding and (re)using reoccurring references to comedic characters, jokes, and comedic ideas and (2) by implementing transitional sequences that called upon various aesthetic and conceptual methods to engage the viewer. I will analyze such methods and techniques from a theoretical standpoint and investigate why they are effective ways of gratifying both the audience and the creator.

When speaking of the *Python* format and its attention to linking devices, it is important to understand that the *Pythons* were not experimenting with the conventions of television as much as they were attempting to improve upon these conventions. The *Python* format was less of an attempt on the part of its creators to make something innovative or profound, as it was a rejection of elements preceding programs had used that the group considered stale. In an interview with David Morgan, Terry Gilliam explained how watching sketches “die “on the BBC program *Beyond the Fringe* influenced the group’s decision to abandon the conventional “black-out” ending and have sketches change from one to another before reaching a conclusion:

We’d seen Peter Cook and Dudley Moore doing so many really great sketches where they traditionally had to end with a zinger, and the zinger was never as good as the sketch. The sketches were about two characters, so in a sense it was more character-driven than plot-driven, [but] time and time again you’d see these really great sketches that would die at the end- they wouldn’t die, but they just wouldn’t end better [than] or as well as the middle bits. So very early on we made a decision to get rid of punch lines.

[...] once we agreed on the idea of not having to end sketches, and having things linked and flowing, it allowed us to get out of a sketch when it was at its peak, when it was

really still good; we would laugh when it was funny and it would move on when it wasn't funny. (Gilliam in Morgan 37)

In *Python*'s case linking devices were born out of need to satisfy the viewer. The *Pythons* were trying to engage their audience on a higher level, rather than having their attention trail off at the end of sketches. By using links *Python* not only remedied the "zinger" problem, they found a new way to charm viewers.

Adopting the usage of links was, perhaps, the most beneficial way that we emulated the *Python* format. Implementing links in *SSMF* rarely went unnoticed as audiences experienced great satisfaction in recognizing them. So why do viewers enjoy links?

Why links?

Bisociation: "A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interested in two entirely different meanings at the same time." (Bergson in Helitzer 19)

One of the more prominent humor theories and one that applies directly to the appeal of "links" is the theory of bisociation or as Koestler defines it, "thinking which connects two or more planes. Perceiving a situation or idea into two self-consistent but habitually incompatible forces of reference. An idea is linked in two associative contacts" (Koestler in Derks 846). In comedy, bisociation comes in many different shapes and forms. Someone making a pun would be the most basic example of bisociation. Yet we often see much more elaborate and complex ways to express dual meaning in a comedic text. According to Koestler, "The pattern underlying all varieties of humor is 'bisociative' - perceiving a situation or event in two habitually incompatible associative contexts"(95).

When links are woven into a *Python* or *SSMF* script many bisociations can arise. One way a writer can bring about bisociations is by embedding references into the script that refer to earlier comedic elements. For instance: in episode 5 of *SSMF* we see a one-armed mime appear in a mock public service announcement aimed at helping the handicapped by employing them in the television industry. Later in the episode, during a mock-news broadcast, the mime appears as a weatherman. The audience can perceive the gag on two planes: (1) The recognition of the mime from the absurd PSA, and (2) the surprise from the absurdity implied by incorporating a mime into a live news broadcast.

Recognizing a bisociation is a reward to the attentive comedic audience for their extended engagement with the text, rewarding the attention invested in the earlier portions of the episode. A black-out, or unlinked sketch format, offers no such rewards. “Connections are a much more sophisticated way to get laughs,” says the prestigious improv comedy teacher and theorist Charna Halpern⁶. She adds, “When an audience sees the players start a pattern, they finish the connections in their own minds. They are forced to think just a tiny bit, and when they have to work along with the players to recognize the laugh, it is much more gratifying for the audience, which has had its intelligence flattered in the brain”(Halpern 29).

At the moment of recognizing a bisociation, audiences can experience a sensation caused by the connection made, resulting in laughter. Koestler argues that this laughter, however, is something of a defense mechanism of the brain in reaction to the discomfort caused by the switching of planes (or trains) of thought. “This [bisociation] causes an abrupt transfer of the train of thought from one matrix to another governed by a different logic or ‘rule of the game’”. But certain emotions, owing to their greater inertia and persistence, cannot follow such nimble jumps of thought; discarded by reason, they are worked off along channels of least resistance in

⁶ Halpern has instructed, written, and performed at Chicago’s *Second City Theatre* for over 25 years.

laughter” (Koestler 95). This phenomenon raises a valuable question: does the audience laugh out of the discomfort caused by the change in thought or do they laugh once they have reconnected the two planes of thought and reached a higher understanding of the situation?

Incongruity: Humor arising from disjoined, ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations or presentations of ideas or situations that are divergent from habitual customs form the bases of incongruity theories. (Helitzer 19)

If one subscribed to the incongruity theory of comedy he would believe the first of these suggestions to be true. “The classic incongruity theories of humor say that humor arises from the pairing of ideas or situations that are not usually paired,” explains humor theorist Peter Derks (Derks 846). By nature, when we try to link things that are unrelated, we form incongruities. Let’s say we had written the weather report scene from episode 5 and then asked ourselves, “How can we link this to the handicapped PSA earlier in the show?” Well, first off, asking that very question poses an inherent incongruity between the handicapped PSA and the weather report, two situations not usually paired. When we decided to insert the mime into the weather report scene we created a new incongruity: a weather man who is also a mime, two seemingly unlike professions.

To incongruity theorists the disjoint, itself, whether explained or not, provides the humor. Helitzer reviewed several takes on humor theory supporting this notion, “Beattie (1776) believed that laughter arose when two or more inconsistent or unsuitable circumstances were united into one complex assemblage and Priestley (1777) viewed the cause of laughter to be the perception of contrast” (Helitzer 19). Thus, mixing and matching anything within an episode would create new and usual pairing and as a result obvious incongruities.

However, in addition to the comedic value of pairing of unlike things, there is something to be said for the recognition of hidden similarities between them. Helitzer explains, this is the basis of the configurational theory of humor:

That humor is experienced when elements originally perceived as unrelated suddenly fall into place is the basis of theories placed into this category. There is clearly some relationship between the notions behind both incongruity and configurationally theories. Each stresses the cognitive and perceptual attributes of humor, but the main difference lies in the point at which humor emerges. As maintained in incongruity theories, it is the perception of “disjointedness” that somehow amuses. In configurational theories, it is the “falling into place” or sudden insight” that leads to amusement. The configurational theories either anticipate or reflect that broader theoretical model of Gestalt psychology.

(19)

If one was to subscribe to the configuration theory, he/she would be viewing the “weatherman mime” scene as funny, not so much because it is simply bizarre but instead at recognizing the (absurd) logic of answering the demands of the earlier PSA by employing the handicapped mime as an on-air talent. However silly it may seem, the logic does make some sense, even if on an absurd level.

The configurational theory, like the bisociative, demonstrates how to reward our audience by honoring their engagement with the program. What the configurational theory is saying, in essence, is that it is not enough to simply juxtapose two random things together. Instead the writer must present a riddle, or a path of thought, that will lead the audience to understanding why they are juxtaposed together. “Every good joke contains an element of the riddle- it may be childishly simple or subtle and challenging- which the listener must solve” (Koestler 86).

One time, one of our cast members, Lauren, suggested that we incorporate an armless “river dancer” into the show’s script. The idea sparked a debate between some of the cast as to whether or not we should simply slip a shot of this dancer into an unrelated scene or to creatively devise a reason for this unusual spectacle and incorporate it into the script. Ultimately, we opted to explain the gag. The opportunity to do so came to us while we were writing two sketches, one about “child abduction” and the other a “limb replacement.” We were searching for a link that would tie the two scenes together and the armless dancer gag seemed to fit. By incorporating the joke, we gave the audience something to laugh about and think about.

Why the Writer likes links

The previous example gives us one of our first glimpses into another form of pleasure that links can present. That pleasure is the one experienced by the creator upon discovering these links and implementing them. It is difficult to say whether we ultimately incorporated the “armless river dancer” gag as a link because it was more effective in pleasing the audience or because of the tempting creative challenge posed upon us to find a way to connect the gag. As a writer, tying together elements like these into a coherent script is a pleasure arguably more enjoyable than the joy of gratifying the viewer, alone. Where does this joy come from?

In order to understand the joy that linking elements brings to the humor writer, it is first necessary to better understand the humor writer. Arthur Koestler stated in *The Act of Creation* (1964) that making connections between unrelated ideas is the essence of what makes a humorist, “The creative act of the humorist consisted in bringing about a momentary fusion between two habitually incompatible matrices”(Koestler 94). According to Koestler, however, and other creative theorists such as Derks, this definition of the humorist’s creative act is not exclusive to the humorist, but rather applicable to all creative acts. Derks explains that defining

creativity and the recognition of humor are not all that different, stating, “It has been suggested that humor comprehension and creativity should be similar because both require the ability to link disparities” (Derks 847). Chapman also subscribes to the parallels between the two, “It is quickly apparent that there is no problem with humor conforming to the basic definition of creativity” (Chapman 247).

One may be beginning to get a clearer picture of what makes the humor writer tick. It can be presumed that every humorist is a creative person and thus, linking disparities is what creative people do, or what creativity is. But do creative people link disparities simply because they can? Where does the need to link come from? What is the reward? Since it is my own creative process that I am trying to understand, I figured one of the best sources that I could use to aid me in answering these questions was the writer that I was closest to: myself. In order to better articulate the creative joy a writer experiences while making these links, I have included journal entries submitted while working on my last *SSMF* script:

Journal #3

Feb 4, 2004

To me, writing scripts is quite like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. I do not even begin drafting a script until most of the pieces are set out before me. These pieces are comedic elements such as character, settings, gags, reoccurring jokes, etc, devised by my co-writers and myself during a pitch meeting. We usually sit in a room after having gathered lists of these elements, devised on our own, and pitch them to each other. Each idea is drawn up on a large poster board where everyone can see them and we use each other's laughter as a barometer for how effective the ideas might be. I take home these poster boards, sit them by my computer and begin writing. This is when the puzzle starts to come together. Before I ever type a word, I have

already convinced myself that all of these elements are somehow cosmically related in some sort of story that has already existed in a parallel universe. Each piece of the puzzle somehow fits. Each character somehow connected. Each laugh incorporated in the same tale. My job is to play the detective and figure out how. Where does this character fit? In what setting? Which characters makes each other funny when you put them in the same room? Which room makes them the funniest? Pretty soon you've written four or five scenes sketches out and the only thing left to do is explain how they are related⁷.

Before the audience ever has a chance to solve the riddle presented to them, the creators must have solved it first. As the journal entry above reflects, I am driven partially by the challenge of solving this riddle. This joy of linking is one that begins with an instinct to investigate the potential context and or meaning of any situation presented. It is a drive to dispel the notion of random things happening without explanation, and its reward is the act of discovering that meaning. "The interlocking of two previously unrelated sills or matrices of thought was again seen to constitute the basic pattern of discovery," says Chapman (Chapman 211). The very act of "discovering" this meaning, whether it be an invented one or not, is what being "creative" is.

Journal #7

Feb 27, 2004

While I was reading some humor theory, today, I came across an illustration with a caption. In the picture a mammoth was eating a caveman while his friend watched. The caption read "I know there's a something funny here, somewhere." This notion of discovering a joke that is embedded in a bizarre situation is fascinating to me. The idea of sensing that a joke is

⁷ Ultimately, linking together sketches and larger blocks of show material is done by employing a grand linking structure. We will examine grand linking structures in the next chapter.

embedded in a situation is even more interesting. Of course, my philosophy is that there is a joke embedded in every situation and that one must find the correct context to get it. Nevertheless the other day in our “development” meeting my friend Nora kept throwing usual events and stories at me, and then I would challenge the group to find the joke in each situation. It is really remarkable how we came up with one for every situation. The question is, did we invent these jokes or discover them? If you posed 100 of the world’s greatest humorists with the same situation how many of them would find the same joke? A similar joke? How many variations? Is there an inherent joke in every situation?

The gratification of discovery is the payoff of creative drive. There is a similar pleasure involved in discovering a possible link during the writing process and the one felt when recognizing the link as a viewer. Though arriving at such a discovery often seems very quick and spontaneous, the discovered connection between two unlike things is rarely something that just pops into the writer’s head. The passage below by Koestler confirms the extensive thought process, in the creative mind that strings together scattered unrelated thoughts:

The moment of truth, the sudden emergence of a new insight, is an act of intuition. Such intuition gives the appearance of miraculous flashes, or short-circuit of reasoning. In fact they may be likened to an immersed chain, of which only the beginning and the end are visible about the surface of consciousness. The diver vanishes at one end of the chain and comes up the other end, guided by invisible links. (Koestler 211)

When this “moment of truth” is reached, the creator, or the writer in our case, experiences a distinct pleasure triggered by the rush of energy that comes from wrapping up the rapid thought process and the basking in this sudden revelation. Koestler calls this moment the “ah ha” moment:

Koestler noted that the structural pattern was the same in art, science, and humor, that is, “the discovery of hidden similarities”. He characterized the outcome of that discovery as the “aah” of art, the “aha” of science, and the “haha” of humor. A sudden change in the angle of vision on reality is the key to the humorous way of thinking, as well as the type of thinking that leads to creativity in the scientific and artistic fields. (Derks 845)

Journal #9

March 9, 2004

In reading Koestle and Derks I have come read about the “aha” experience, or the delight/pleasure that one receives upon discovering a connection between two things previously unrealized or incongruent. This is probably the basis for my writing scripts as well as this paper; making connections between jokes and to make a script; making my connections between writing scripts and my research. I am constantly seeking the connections that I believe lie between so many things, whether they truly exist or not. I suppose conspiracy theorists are hooked on this same feeling. Let’s face it, the “eureka experience” is a creative high and I am a junkie. One might read this and think that I use the term “high” abstractly, but I mean it quite literally. Whether I’m sitting in class, staring at my ceiling, or reading a book, the experience feels quite similar. I feel a rush of energy as the synapses come together. My breathing hurries. My limbs tingle. And then, I feel a sense of relief that I don’t have to wonder about the incongruity any longer. This complacency does not last long, before I seek out the next incongruity.

How to link

How is the “aha” experienced carried from the writer to the audience? What, specifically, links material together? Do scattered comedic elements just find each other? Does the show just suddenly fall into place? I would be betraying the intentions of this paper if I were to only outline

the effect of links and not the various methods that I have used to apply them. So how do you link elements? Well, to begin with, much of what I have learned about linking elements, I learned by intensely studying old *Python* episodes. The way the show streamed seemed a bit esoteric to me at first viewing, but with careful and repeated analysis, I was able to distinguish and identify several specific methods of implementing links. I borrowed some of these methods, applied them to my own writing, and, in time, even devised new ones that derived from *Python*. There are two specific techniques the *Pythons* and *SSMF* used to apply links: (1) by embedding and (re)using reoccurring references and elements and (2) by implementing transitional sequences.

Reoccurring elements/references:

We have already briefly touched the notion of creating links by embedded reoccurring references and elements into the show script. The *Pythons* were masters of inventing links by planting recurring elements into sketches that would reference other previously viewed sketches. For example, in the opening moment of the very first *Python* episode, without explanation, a chalkboard with several pigs drawn on it is displayed. Then, several minutes later, a pig falls from the sky and crushes one of the *Python*'s cast members, Mike Palin. The shot of the chalkboard follows this sequence and an "X" is drawn over one of the pigs. Later in the show, during a fake newscast, the sound of a squealing pig arises over the anchorman's news report. The anchorman, played by John Cleese, proceeds to take a pistol out of his pocket and shoot what we can assume is a pig under his news desk. Again, the pig slaying is followed by a cut away to the black board, where another pig has been crossed off.

In one of my early attempts to emulate the *Python* format, I tried to plant a recurring element into an episode of *Spider Monkeys*. I chose the food product, "Cheez Wiz," as a fit

device for embedding into various sketches, with the hope of rewarding audiences for recognizing its omnipresence. In the first sketch of Episode 6, a car mechanic professes the effectiveness of Cheez Wiz in preventing engine combustion. Several sketches later, a woman refers to the product as a helpful agent in controlling her ambiguous feminine hygiene problems. And finally, during the show's climatic finish, a demonic baby is extinguished by using a magical antidote containing a certain active ingredient with a distinctive orange coloration and viscous texture.

From the above example, one may get a clearer example of how to apply or “embed” reoccurring elements into a comedic script, but what, specifically, is “embedded?” In *SSMF*, reoccurring jokes and references generally come in three different forms: reoccurring characters, verbal references, and themes.

Characters:

When attempting to charm one's audience, characters are amongst the most effective reoccurring elements one can incorporate into a script. In both successful sketches and feature length scripts endearing characters are a “hook” for captivating viewers. One of the reasons that reoccurring characters are so effective is that they provide instant cues to their own comedic context. Like any other embedded element, reoccurring characters plant a hyperlink into the viewer's mind to their previous character traits and comedic tendencies. Unlike other embedded elements though, the character's frame of reference does not need to be explained or spelled out the way a verbal gag might need to be. Instead rather, the comedic character's appearance, speech, and other mannerisms alone explain or remind us of his/her comedic context.

When planting a reoccurring character into the script, however, a writer must be concerned with the degree of recognition that the character will inspire in the audience. It is

almost useless, for comedic purposes, to employ a reoccurring character if he/she is not memorable. Narrative theorist Slomith Rimmon-Kenan explains, “As a consequence of the restriction of qualities and the absence of development, flat characters are rarely recognized and rarely remembered by the reader. Round characters are defined by contrastive implications, namely those that are not flat. Not being flat involves having more than one quality and enveloping the course of the action” (Rimmon-Kenan 40).

A good example of an effective use of a reoccurring character in *SSMF* comes from episode 14. Early in this episode, two children sit at home anticipating the arrival of their father. When he walks through the door hours later than expected, it is revealed that the dad is the world’s worst “guesstimator,” meaning he has very poor abilities to make numerical estimations. The character is developed in the two-minute long scene with jokes aimed at his poor “guesstimation” abilities: he has forgotten his son’s birthday, expects a \$1,000,000 paycheck for construction work, etc. The character is further developed by a distinctive wardrobe, a jean jacket worn over flannel shirt to present the appearance of a blue-collar worker, and an unmistakable New Jersey accent.

Later in the episode a man is pulled off of the street and asked to participate in a commercial for a fast food chain. The task demanded of the bystander is to estimate the cost of the restaurant’s latest sandwich. The angle of the ad is to contrast the surprisingly low price of the sandwich with the average customer’s expectation of the price. Coincidentally, though, the commercial producer’s have chosen the wrong person for the job: the world’s worst “guesstimator.” Audiences often begin laughing upon the appearance of this character alone in this spot. They recognize the character, by his appearance and accent, and immediately apply the qualities attached to him earlier to the present situation. There is no need to explain why this man

would make a poor guess on the sandwich's price, because we have already instilled the comedic context of this character earlier in the show. The man is asked what he would pay for the sandwich, thinks for a minute and replies, "about \$150,000." Much of the audience makes the connection and is rewarded for their attentiveness.

Verbal running gags:

Verbal running gags are those lines that are repeated in the dialogue at multiple times during the show. Like other reoccurring elements, they are funny because of the connection makes between the context of the dialogue at both past and present instances. Since verbal gags are often direct quotes from earlier lines, they can be more direct references than visual or thematic gags that allude to early ones rather than repeating them. But as humor writer Andrew Horton explains, the principal of repetition is an effective one in comedy, whether verbal or not, "If it's funny once, it will be funny again, especially with slight variations. (...) And this goes for verbal or visual repetition" (Horton 26).

One example of how *SSMF* employed a running verbal gag is the "Dave Matthews Cover Band Cover Band" joke on episode 12. Early in the program a group of teens on a game show learn that they may win tickets to see the "Dave Matthews Cover Band Cover Band" (or DMCBCB) live in concert. One teen remarks "they are one of a kind!" as the rest celebrate. The initial gag is that a cover band of a cover band is certainly not original. Later in the program, we over hear two extras raving about a DMCBCB concert on a bus. And finally, late in the program, we revisit the game show after the teens have won tickets to the DMCBCB concert. One of the teens spoils the fun for the rest by declaring, "You don't get it! They just rip off the songs that the Dave Matthews Cover Band writes."

Themes:

Sometimes different elements that are unlike in principle (characters, dialogue, etc.) share the same comedic essence or thematic content and can also serve as valuable linking devices. Often in *SSMF*, a theme is chosen before or midway through the writing process and each sketch or scene written is done with the theme in mind. The result can range from subtle dialogue references to the theme to a complete stylistic commitment to parody an entire genre. Some examples of themes used in *SSMF* have been a “survivor” theme, a “dream show,” a “Christmas special,” and many more.

Using themes as a linking device is probably the most versatile method in making simple, short term links, but the most challenging in terms of linking the entire show’s content under the same veil of content. When we wrote episode 12, “Our Dream Show,” we set out to link nearly all elements of the show under the theme of “dreams.” Linking together scenes under this theme proved to be very easy, as we would simply use a character in one scene waking up from the scene previous, giving the audience the impression that previous sketch was just a dream.

One of the greatest aspects of show themes, with regard there potential to link material, is that they lay the groundwork for larger grand linking structures. Grand linking structures are ways that the episode is formatted, with regards to the order of material and relevant plot and character exposition. This concept is similar to what improv comedians might refer to as the comedic “game.” The rules of this game are often defined by the theme, as is the case with the “survivor” themed show, whose format derived directly from the game show, *Survivor*. Chapter four will expand more on the nature and function of grand linking structures.

Transitions:

As mentioned earlier, transitions are another way, along with embedded references, to link disjointed sketches, scenes, and comedic ideas together. When one sketch ends and the next

begins, how can the shift in location, characters, and scenarios occur, undetected? On a theoretical level, transitions are the embodiment of a configurational explanation between two unrelated or incongruent sketches. On a technical level, they are often driven by visual stylistic methods that explore the comedic potentials of the medium.

Perhaps the most creative way that *Python*'s creators made connections was by forming innovative transitions between the sketches themselves. As mentioned earlier, *Python* rarely if ever blacked out the end of one sketch before beginning another. Instead they bridged sketches in a seamless manner by using various visual and conceptual transitions. Often, the transitions themselves proved to be funnier than the sketches. In the course of studying the show, I recognized several transitions that were particularly instrumental in the *Python* format. I would frequently borrow these techniques in finding ways to bridge the sketches of my own show. I would also devise new ways to transition in and out of sketches

The Match Cut transition:

A match cut or match action between the last shot of one sketch and the first show of the next. By replacing the last image with a similar one, the producers hold the audiences attention and maintain the same general tonality and visual conceptualization though the context has changed. Though we have entered a new part of the show, the tranistion has called little attention to itself. Had we changed sketches in a more traditional sense, by introducing it, or blacking out, the viewer might be inclined to turn his/her attention elsewhere.

The Match Audio Transition:

A close relative of the match action transition. Often in Python, we hear the last word of one sketch repeated, or even preempted by the first word of the next sketch. A character from the new sketch may finish the sentence of a character from the last sketch. This transition is equally effective as the visual match cut, in maintaining the audience's attention. If one was simply listening to the show and not looking, he/she may not even notice the change in scenery.

Theory applied: None. Attention getting device, only. No humor theory

Used in *Spider Monkeys*:

In the second sketch of SSMF Episode 11, we see a character "Buddy" who has been infected with Mad cow disease attempting to eat a hamburger. For the sake of his health, an unidentified hand reaches into the screen and takes the burger from his plate. The next show, a close up on the burger, follows the item onto a student's plate who is in a school cafeteria. The camera zooms out to a wider shot and the next sketch has begun.

Used in *Spider Monkeys*:

In the third sketch of SSMF Episode 6, "Ta-Dow: Female Promiscuouer" is giving a speech on safe sex. He warns viewers to wear a condom or else, "you might get-" We cut to a beach where two women are hysterically jumping around. "Crabs!", one of them shouts out to warn the other. This is the first shot of the fourth sketch.

<p><u>Intertextual Transitions</u> <i>Often “Python” drifts away from more technical transitions to more cerebral conceptual transitions. These transitions are less subtle and require the viewer’s heightened attention in order to understand, though they reward the viewer for their awareness.</i></p> <p><u>The cut away to behind the scenes action:</u> One example of a conceptual transition is the way that “Python” often cuts away to a behind-the-scenes shot, where we see the production crew actually making the fictionalized sketch from the perspective of the creators. This sort of transition adds an interesting element of commentary of the medium itself.</p> <p><u>The screen inside the screen:</u> Sometimes “Python” provides a similar kind of conceptual commentary by depicting the action on screen in another light. We often see the previously viewed sketch appear on a prop television that is acting as a set piece. In other words the characters of one sketch may be watching another sketch on their own television. This style transition raises questions about dispensing of belief and the nature of reality and the relationship between the media and reality.</p> <p><u>Commercial/news interruptions</u> Ironically, Python often utilizes transitions that call attention to themselves for their abruptness. These transitions announce themselves abruptly in the middle of a sketch, causes a blatant disruption. Python often utilizes transitions with faux new bulletins, commercials, and a Python trademark, the man behind-the-desk announcing a new act by saying “And now for something completely different.</p> <p>Theory applied: Self referential; bisociative in making this self reference in addition to the content within the show</p>	<p><u>Used in Spider Monkeys:</u> <i>In the first sketch of Episode 15, a faux movie trailer for “the greatest love story ever told” is interrupted when we hear an off screen voice yell, “cut”. A cut reveals that the fictitious director of the sketch ordered the command. As he goes into a dialogue with one of the female crewmembers the next sketch has begins.</i></p> <p><u>Used in Spider Monkeys:</u> <i>Episode 14 sketch 12: The concluding shot of a mock-advertisement for a “limb replacement” service is repeated, seen for the second time with the recognizable borders of a television screen around the frame of the shot. We cut to a family watching the commercial in their living room. “I wonder where they get all those replacement limbs from?” says the mother character. It is the first line of the new sketch.</i></p> <p><u>Used in Spider Monkeys:</u> Episode 15 sketch four: A sketch about a man and a woman on an awkward date ends when an abrupt news bulletin cuts in. The anchorman, sitting behind the news desk announces, “And now the world’s weakest man!” We cut to an image of a scrawny white male struggling to lift a weight bar.</p>
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How do these type of links tie into the theoretical models discussed in this chapter?

Transitions probably relate most closely to the configurational theory of humor. Understanding why transitions appeal to the audience helps one understand even more elaborately the difference between the incongruity and configuration theories. As we learned from Helitzer earlier, “the

main difference lies in the point at which humor emerges. As maintained in incongruity theories, it is the perception of “disjointedness” that somehow amuses. In configurational theories, it is the “falling into place” or sudden insight” that leads to amusement” (Helitzer 20). If we were to

<p><u>Cut to another level of consciousness (dreams, fantasy, etc)</u> <i>Similar to the cut/away to different textual representations of media, are cut aways to various levels of consciousness. The Pythons used the internal psychology of the characters as a liaison to different world as well.</i></p> <p><u>The wake up transition:</u> For example a sketch could end abruptly when a character in the next sketches is awoken from a state of sleep, giving the audience the impression that the sketch previously viewed was simply the dream of the character they are now watching. The resounding effect of using a characters consciousness as a transition whether it be by using the dream transition, a fantasy, or a insane man’s delusions, is providing the audience with a sense of psychological depth not only in there examination of character, but also by commenting on the nature of the human imagination itself.</p> <p><u>Intersecting plotlines/characters</u> One clever transition that Python uses is one that reveals an intersection between the worlds of two different sketches, often by depicting characters from separate worlds in the same shot. A character from one sketch may appear on the set of another, lost, confused, or insistent that a mistake has taken place. This transition is also effective in bridging an element of one sketch, in this case character or setting, into another minimizing the audiences awareness of other changing elements.</p> <p>Theory applied: Configurational; explains context of previous scene</p>	<p><u>Used in Spider Monkeys:</u> Episode 12 sketch 8: In the final moments of this sketch a little girl hears a knock on her bedroom door. She opens the door and discovers the outside world has been transformed into a video game. We cut to a man on a bus as he awakes from a sleep. The juxtaposition suggests the previous sketch was a dream of his and that we are now in the realistic setting of a bus, where the next sketch takes place.</p> <p><u>Used in Spider Monkeys:</u> Episode 11 sketch five. Near the end of a sketch that follows a man on his cell phone, who creates havoc that he is unaware of as he walks and talks on it, we see the man driving in his car, while still talking on his phone. The man crashes his car into a group of kids who are joy riding in a shopping cart. We cut to the exterior of the car, where it is learned that the kids were videotaping the crash for a fictitious stunt-tv show that we follow in the next sketch.</p>
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merely juxtapose the end of one scene with the beginning on the next, with a simple cut, it would be possible to synthesize a new joke merely out of the odd contrast (or incongruity) between the scenes. However, most viewers would probably not take the time to reflect upon the contrasts

between the two scenes, and even if they did, the humor resulting from the situation would be one manifested in the viewer's head and out of the creator's control. What the creator can control is how explicitly this contrast is presented. Transitions can be tools for presenting incongruities and hinting at their possible configurational context.

Another problem that not having a transition poses is one of holding the viewer's attention. When moving from one sketch to the next without a transition, one leaves his/her faith in the viewer to continue engaging in the show. When luring them in the next sketch, by having one flow into the next seamlessly, the viewer does not have the opportunity to release his/her gaze. A black out format permits for such a break in viewership, whereas transitions do not.

Though the latter reason for implementing a transition is one not related to humor theory, it is a valid concern. The first transition identified on the chart above, addresses this concern only. The match cut and match audio transitions give little attention to content. They are solely attention-sustaining devices.

Other transitions, such as cutting to different levels of consciousness are closely tied into the configurational concept. In fact, one could argue that the transition itself is an embodiment of this theory. If juxtaposing two unlike things presents an incongruity and the configurational theory is a sudden realization or explanation of this incongruity, then transitions pave the way to this realization.

Thus is the case with the transitions that cut to different levels of consciousness. These transitions help enhance the comedic context of the sketch that they cut away from, and ultimately of the entire episode, by giving the audience an added frame of reference. For example when a character awakens from a sleep, the audiences can assume that the previous sketch was just a dream that the character was having. This perspective can help explain the

surrealism of the previous sketch. It can also say something about the character awakening from the dream. The content of the previous sketch can give the audience some sort of inference about the sleeping characters unconscious desires. That may not be very funny if it were a male character dreaming about cars or girls, but it may be funny if the previous scene was about little girls playing with dolls. Had the previous sketch been blacked out, though, and there been no transition between the two, we would simply see a character awakening from a sleep with no added context.

Intertextual transitions are closely tied into the bisociative theory of humor. These transitions can comment on the nature of the medium of television itself, thereby providing an added joke to the text that exists outside of the text. Bisociation occurs in the intertextual transition when the joke coexists with whatever is going on within the context of the show as well. Sort of like if I was writing about how hard it was for me to write a transitional paragraph into the transition section (which is true by the way). It's funny because of the two planes of thinking that this notion applies to: (1) the significance of the content of the paragraph itself and (2) the added self-reflexive plane of thought concerning the process of constructing the paragraph itself.

Conclusion

Incorporating linking elements into *SSMF*, as it was for *Python*, was a way to set it apart from other blackout formats. The more links that we incorporated; the more incongruity's would arise. It is in this way that links allows one to breed new comedic material through the shows structure, itself, in addition to its content.

The configurational, bisociative, and incongruity theories are all valid ones in my experience as both a viewer and producer of comedy television. The unusual juxtaposition of two

unlike things, itself, is often quite funny and amply amusement for an audience. However, an unusual juxtaposition that somehow leads the audience to a series of conclusions, realizing the logic behind their juxtaposition is very often an even more effective way to amuse the viewer. In addition adding amusement to, the formation of such connective gags also inherently engages the audience into becoming a more active viewer, thus raising their level of appreciation of all the humor involved in an episode. Sustaining the audience's engagement is a greater challenge over an extended period of time and a natural liaison into the need for narrative construction.

Chapter 3: **Narrative**

Linking comedic elements is certainly an effective means of writing sketch comedy, or at least *SSMF*, on a higher level, but it is certainly not an end. As one continues to link comedic elements more and more, one has to wonder where this entangled web will lead them. Albeit, at one time *Python*'s was the most revolutionary format that sketch comedy television had ever seen; yet it was not flawless.

By our fourth season we were beginning to ask ourselves some critical creative questions. How do we take these surreal entanglements and turn them into something coherent that will hold our audience's attention? Why tell a half story when you could tell a whole one? The road paved by comedic links, leads back to the narrative. It had almost never occurred to us that we could tell a story. Mostly because at our age and experience level, we did not feel that we had any stories to tell. Yet, what if we could write a story that was not based on any experiences we had had, but instead, one that was purely synthesized out of unrelated comedic elements and ideas shared by the group?

If *Python* had put narrative structure into a blender, *SSMF* would attempt to paste the pieces back together. This chapter will examine how *SSMF* took their lead from *Python* to raise narrative structure in our writing. It will look at the reasons why *Python* and later *SSMF* felt inclined to do this; why it was effective in pleasing our audience; and finally this chapter will outline how to take the web of comedic elements and weave it into a story.

Why Narrative?

Python and the narrative:

While I idolized the *Pythons* and sought to emulate them in my writing, there were some aspects of their format that I did not wish to incorporate, or that I even felt I could improve upon. The main aspect of *Python* that I felt was missing was an overall sense of unity. *Python* shows seemed to be laced together from sketch to sketch, but had no general identity when viewed as an entire episode. Audiences were led from place to place, yet by the end of the show, were not quite sure where they had been. This passage from the *Encyclopedia of Television* discusses how the *Python* format was both intentionally fragmented, yet sometimes difficult to watch:

The content of Monty Python's Flying Circus was designed to be disconcerting to viewers who expected to see typical television fare. This was obvious from the very first episode. The opening "discussion" features a farmer who believes his sheep are birds and that they nest in trees. This bit is followed by a conversation between two Frenchmen who consider the commercial potential of flying sheep. Just as viewers thought they were beginning to understand the flow of the show, it cut to a shot of a man behind a news desk announcing, "And now for something completely different," and the scene shifted to a totally unrelated topic. The thread might return to a previous sketch but, more often there was no closure, only more fragmented scenes. [...] the macabre and disorienting were basic elements of the show. (Newcomb 1068)

But in the long run, the Pythons found that disorienting viewers was not always what they wanted to do. Python's evolution over time led them back to a conventional narrative structure. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Python's history, is the manner in which the traditional

narrative subtly reemerged throughout the duration of the series, and was eventually fully realized when the group ultimately began making feature films. During the first two seasons, Python's creators began gradually incorporating more and more recurring elements like running gags, frequent characters, and intersecting plots. By the second season, the show began tying together whole episodes by following the extended anecdotes of certain characters. And finally, by the show's last season, the Python writers had composed two episodes with one completely consistent plot line. These episodes titled "The Cycling Tour" and "Mr. Neutron" were the result of Michael Palin and Terry Jones's increased attention to developing reemerging characters. "By that time [season three] Terry Jones and myself were getting much more keen on the longer narrative." (Palin in Morgan 132). As Palin went on to explain in this interview with David Morgan, having these characters appear more frequently and having more things happen to them led to a reemergence of narrative:

I really don't know quite why something like "The Cycling Tour" was as long as it was. There had been germs of that in some of the early sketches: for instance, the tennis-playing blancmange and the Podgorny family. What would happen is you have nice characters who then could crop up during the program, so suddenly more and more seemed to revolve around these two characters. And I supposed that the Cycling Tour was a supreme example of stretching characters right out through a program, which we then touch on all sorts of things-China, for one- so Mr. Pither (who was a bicycle man_) became almost like a linking device that took over the show. Linking devices were usually quite short; it'd be a colonel who'd come on and say, "right, stop that, very silly." But with Mr. Pither, he

would appear at various moments during the show [and] these mentions would be much longer, they'd be little adventures in themselves. (132)

This new conservatism in narrative structure was quite a change for a show that began by rejecting the traditional narrative. In their commitment to create an alternative to audience expectations, *Python* actually wound up taking a traditional approach to the narrative. This route also paved the way to the *Python*'s film success, which was put on hold by the disappointment of the group's first film, *And Now for Something Completely Different*. This first film did not elicit any narrative cohesion, nor audience enthusiasm. John Cleese explained his theory on why the film failed and why *Pythons* had to submit to the narrative in order to realize any success in the film medium:

The first time we showed *And Now for Something Different*, there was hilarious laughter up to fifty minutes, then the audience went quiet for twenty, twenty-five minutes, and then they came up again and finished very well. So we took all that middle material, put it at the beginning and it all worked beautifully up to about fifty minutes, and then [the] audience got quiet! We discovered that whatever order we put the material in, at about fifty minutes they stopped laughing. And in order to get people to go with you past the fifty-minute mark they have to want to know what's going to happen next. In other words you have to have characters that they care about and a story they can enjoy and believe in. There's huge learning curve. (121)

After the first film tanked, *Python*'s creators realized the necessity of narrative structure. The group followed up *And Now for Something Completely Different* with two critically and

financially successful films, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and *The Life of Brian*, both of which follow a conventional narrative structure.

The transformation of the Spider Monkey format to a more conventional narrative followed a similar path. It seemed that the more recurring elements that we had in the show, the more audiences responded to them. Incorporating the same characters, jokes, and plotlines over and over, appealed to viewers. We figured that the best way to maximize this effect was to write a script that incorporated more of these reoccurring elements. Gradually, episodes began to incorporate more characteristics of traditional narrative. Finally, by our sixteenth episode, we had created an episode that was based on one, traditional central plotline.

But what was most puzzling to me was how this narrative thread seemed to emerge out of nowhere. Like Python, we had never made a conscious commitment to write one central narrative. Instead, some sort of elusive force seemed to guide us into arriving at stories. Seeking to understand where the emergence of narrative came from and why was, perhaps, the central question that I sought to answer when I first set out to write this thesis. In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to understand the function of narrative in comedy. Why should one even try to tell a story, when attempting to make viewers of film and television laugh?

What the experts say:

The function of narrative is to engage the audience. The last chapter exemplified how to use links as a way to sustain the audience's engagement. Often audiences are rewarded for their sustained engagement with a comedic text when references to earlier comedic elements are presented. The viewer makes the connection and is rewarded with an added comedic jolt. By applying this principle of audience engagement being rewarded by links, one can begin to understand the appeal of narrative. Loosely defined, narrative can be thought of as a system for

applying an optimal amount of links. A strong well-defined plot that utilizes strong well-developed characters can serve like one big reference matrix. As Neal Gabler explains, in recent history narrative has functioned as a “hooking” device for locking in the audience’s attention. “They had always relied on narrative because it was the surest way of engaging an audience,” says Gabler of producers of pop culture (Gabler 22).

From a purely empirical standpoint, narrative can be seen as an equation for controlling audiences by triggering sensations and emotions. As John Cleese mentioned earlier, at a certain point a comic writer must reach for something beyond the jokes themselves in order to keep an audience interested. "And in order to get people to go with you past the fifty-minute mark they have to want to know what’s going to happen next. In other words you have to have characters that they care about and a story they can enjoy and believe in" (Morgan 121). The only way to interest the audience in the fate of the characters is to use narrative as a backbone for developing them.

Yet why would *SSMF*, a thirty-minute comedy show, need to worry about engaging an audience for an extended period of time? The demand for an expanded engagement presented itself when we began exhibiting new episodes at the student theater. Entertaining large crowds (up to three hundred students) made us rethink what we were presenting to them. It became clear that we would have to exhibit shows that ran over thirty minutes in order to give audiences a reason to leave their homes and watch *SSMF* on the large screen. When we began formatting these extended shows, like the *Pythons*, we struggled with creative solutions to making our show engaging for a longer period of time. Around the same time, we were beginning to see a narrative thread emerging in our episodes.

Though we did not, at the time, make a conscious decision to incorporate narrative, we did decide to incorporate a consistent character throughout the show. The character would be a straight man, Joe, one who would have an outsider's perspective throughout the show. Joe was a very likeable character, played by an actor, Joe Sykes, who was brought in from outside the group. Joe's removal from the group helped frame the absurdity that existed within the show's cast from an outsider's perspective. Recognizing this absurdity was an act that the audience and Joe experienced together.

The longer and more intricately an audience identifies with the same narrative and its characters, the more emotionally invested they are in the show. If an audience only sees a character once, let's say, they have made little emotional investment. They will not care what happens to the character after they are gone. But supposing the audience sees this character over and over, and becomes more aware of the many facets of their personality, their emotional investment is increased. The audience develops a concern for what happens to the character, by living vicariously through him/her. In helping the audience relate the text to their lives, narrative marks the path between the situations depicted on screen and in the viewer's own experiences. As Gabler explains, increasing the audience's emotional engagement through narrative heightens the writer's ability to control an audience's emotions:

After all, what were plots but mechanisms for inducing in audiences a heightened sense of the emotions and sensations that they feel in real life: fear, love, happiness, melancholy, exhilaration? Basically, plots were rigged to trigger the responses viewer's presumably wanted to feel. That, indeed was, the major craft of plotting: Great narrative novelists and screenwriters were the ones with the skill to manipulate the audience.

(Gabler 20)

Such analyses of narrative tend to demystify their effect and reduce its function to an almost mechanical process of manipulating audiences. Narrative theorist Thomas Leitch shares such an analysis of narrative, here, by equating its effect on audiences with that of what one may find in an amusement park:

Stories are designed primarily to provide information but to give their audience a certain kind of experience- the experience of making sense of a world designed precisely to respond to their attempts- and this experience is in itself simply an experience, no more or less fictional than the roller coaster ride it is sometimes said to resemble (Leitch 199)

Yet, there is more to be said for stories than to simply analyze their divisiveness, as if they were computer programs designed to download emotions into the viewer. One must also recognize that the function of narrative greatly depends on its ability to relate to common human experience. Whether or not the narrative comes from the writer's own experiences, and in the case of *SSMF* they rarely do, stories often appeal to audiences because they remind them of their own lives. In the last chapter we talked about rewarding audiences by allowing them to make small connections between references in the text. When we are dealing with a large-scale narrative we attempt to make another, larger connections. This connection lie between the text and the viewer's lived experience. Leitch acknowledges this relationship as one that helps viewer's gain a sense of self-identity:

(...) for stories, as I have maintained, are not primarily a means of communicating information but a transaction designated to arouse and satisfy the audience's narratives, a sense of themselves, as existing in a world of contingent meanings which encourages guesses about its order within intimations whose authority is never final. (198)

In giving the audience a more believable character, like Joe, we left the door open for viewers to dive into the show, a bit more deeply, and see a bit of themselves in the show. Certainly, we don't expect audiences to relate completely with this character, as we do not consider ourselves experts in this aspect of storytelling. But, by using just a touch of this principle we gave audiences a bit more reason to care.

In addition to giving audiences a central frame of reference within the show, narrative also gives people a central frame of reference with each other. Narrative helps centralize the subjectivity of images and ideas that a fragmented narrative, such as Python, can provide. Instead narrative cues common references that orchestrate audiences together in their interpretation of the text. Having audiences on the same page can increase the affability of the program, as well, since people tend to enjoy the experience more, knowing that it is a shared one. Gabler embraces this notion of an expanded value of narrative:

But plots were far more hooks for the audiences. The storylines of popular books and movies were archetypes that bound us together; there was enormous satisfaction in sitting in theater with other viewers, all anticipation g just how the story would resolve. (Gabler 22)

Having audiences gathered together in the student theater allowed us to observe this shared experience first hand. Undoubtedly, audiences tended to enjoy the longer, features that we exhibited more than the short, unrelated sketches that preceded them. It was during these early portions of our shows that spectators choose to make use of their time by visiting bathroom and catching up with their friends.

Comedy vs. Narrative

We know that narrative helps us engage our audience, but can it help us humor our audience? Or does it hurt our ability to humor our audience? When I first began working on *SSMF*, I carried a notion in my head that somehow comedy and narrative were mutually exclusive. But then as the narrative thread seemed to emerge in *SSMF*, I started to believe that somehow the narrative might be enhancing the humor. After all, it was through trying to improve and develop upon the comedic elements of the show that we came into using narrative. But, were we merely using narrative to engage the audience longer so that we could hit them with more jokes? Are jokes and gags simply ways to spice up a bland narrative? Do narrative and comedy exist in spite of each other? Is the narrative a necessary evil in keeping customers in the comedy store? Or can the narrative be made to enhance humor? Humor to enhance the narrative? Can they be written simultaneously? Is there any shared ground between comedy and narrative? Is it possible that they are not so different?

Humor theorist Jerry Palmer believes a joke sequence and a narrative one are two separate entities. He, too, sought to explain the relationship between them:

However, it is clear that frequently gags are incorporated into larger-scale narratives that are not themselves organized in the way we have just seen to be typical of the gag sequence what form of relationship is it possible to trace between gags and non-comic narrative, or between gags and narrative in general? And especially, what form of relationship is it possible to trace between gags and that fundamental narrative category, the characters? (Palmer 143)

Palmer's idealization of a "typical" gag sequence is likely to be one that reflects the "black out" variety, vaudevillian, and stand up comic formats of the early half of the 20th

century. It is understandable, then, from his perspective to view the structure of comedy as one that is, inherently, non-narrative. As Palmer goes on to conclude in answering his above questions:

Where comedy which does contain narrative is concerned we may postulate that the relationship will take one of two forms, either:

- A) the narrative will in fact consist of nothing more than the articulation of jokes that together into a joke sequence, in which case the narrative conforms to the description given in the previous chapter; or
- B) jokes will be linked by something which is not in itself comic, in other words some form of non-comic narrative; in this case we need to theorize the relationship between the comic moments and the non-comic narrative; this relationship in turn will necessarily take one of two forms, either;

bi) the non-comic narratives is no more than a series of links between jokes; or

b ii) the narrative serves some further purpose, such as the delineation of character, or of a sequence of events which some aesthetic purpose above and beyond that or merely lining some jokes together-(...)

Where the comic episodes and grotesque characters are inserted into a narrative framework, which has a purpose beyond that of linking jokes or comic episodes.

(Palmer 143)

Palmer's insight on the relationship between comedy and narrative suggests that they can enhance each other for various purposes, but they are certainly not necessarily the same. This perspective rejects the notion that there is any sort of natural relationship between joke telling and storytelling; instead, this is a relationship that is forced with one imposed upon the other, by the creator, for the sake of enhancing the text.

However, I maintain that these elements are not coexisting strangers, but rather close relatives. The relationship between comedy and narrative is a natural one. One can certainly force jokes into an unrelated narrative, as one can also paste together a farcical narrative in an attempt to package comedic material. But if the text is treated with care and comedic elements

are allowed to naturally dictate narrative ones, and vice-versa, the relationship between the two will be a happy union. In the following section, I will excavate evidence of the inherent relationship between comedy (or joke telling) and narrative.

Sketch vs. Story:

In order to reveal the intrinsic relationship between comedy and narrative, I will first outline the relationship between the comedic format of early *Python* and *SSMF* shows: the sketch, and its distant cousin, the story. In the struggle between comedy and narrative, the first battle to be fought is between sketch and story. There are several fundamental differences between sketch and story. Sketches rarely develop characters and/or resolve their conflicts, whereas stories do. Sketches, when seen together in the same viewing (i.e., a TV show) rarely have any interaction between each other. Nor is there any causality in one explaining the other. This difference obviously varies with programs such as *SSMF* and *Python*, whose trademarks are partially based on their ability to weave sketches. Comic writing teacher Lew Schwartz pointed out that sketches are often less popular than stories, because of their inability to engage the audience, the way narrative does:

The long sketch does not seem to have too many supporters at the time of going to press.

The main problem would appear to be the difficulty in sustaining the incidence of laughter over the extended period. Unless the laughs come thick and fast there is a danger of the audience becoming bored. (Schwartz 38)

We know that we can lose audience's attention due to their indifference to vague or unfamiliar characters. But what if one was somehow able to follow the same characters in and out of sketches? If sketches throughout the show consistently depict the same characters, which were informed of the events of previous sketches, those sketches would begin to resemble scenes

of a narrative. In this exercise, a sketch is merely a small piece of the story. We have already explained how creating cohesiveness between sketches is a way to enhance humor. So wouldn't this partial implementation of cohesiveness be a natural enhancement of both the comedy and narrative qualities of a text?

One could argue that once you have turned a sketch into a scene, or a piece of the story, it is no longer a sketch. This is false on the grounds that it is not necessary to change the internal structure of the sketch in order to create cohesiveness between sketches. Yet changing the internal structure of the sketch may be exactly what should be done.

In exemplifying the natural relationship between comedy and narrative, it is necessary to outline the mutual benefit of the comedic and narrative elements of a text when the sketches internal structure is carefully crafted. Whereas stories generally have a beginning middle and an end, sketches do not. Instead sketches tend to display a series of jokes, or variations of a joke with little arch in action or character. As Schwartz explains, this format is a result of writers using a sketch as a venue for hosting a plethora of gags, "The normal formula for the long sketch is fairly straightforward. You take a theme and fill it with as many gags on them as you can create, remember, or re-write" (Schwartz 38).

Inventing multiple variations on a comedic ideal is an important element of writing a comedic script. However, it is not necessary to display all of the variations. Instead it is more optimal to choose the best gags only for the sake of gratifying the audience, rather than "boring" them as Schwartz precautions us against doing. If one were to edit a comedic sketch with the acceptance of this notion that not all variations need to be displayed, he/she would be making a large step towards narrowing the gap between sketch and story. For, in this manner, a sketch can be made into what narrative theorist Gerald Prince calls a minimal story:

A minimal story consists of three conjoined events. The first and the third events are stative, the second is active. Furthermore the third event is the inverse of the first. Finally, the three events are conjoined by conjunctive features in such a way that (a) the first event precedes the second in time and the second precedes the third, and (b) the second causes the third. (Prince in Rimmon-Kennan 18)

If one were to limit themselves to three variations they would have laid the groundwork for a minimal story. There is no law that says a sketch needs to have more than three general movements. However, there is underlying evidence that dividing a joke into three parts is one of the best ways to maximize its effectiveness. There is also a universal guideline for screenplays, whether film or television, to follow a narrative structure with three acts. The correlation between the above ideals will be expanded upon shortly.

During an early phase of writing episode 15, our cast had created and collected a slew of comedic ideas based around a man stranded on a raft in the middle of the ocean. “What if the man had a cell phone, but threw it into the water because he was being harassed by phone solicitors,” one of us suggested. “What if he received mail on his raft?” was another. By the time we were finished we had about eight comedic ideas, some better than others. But, instead of simply depicting one sketch, with all these variations of the same joke, presented in the same package, we divided the sketch into three distinct parts or acts. We did this by first selecting what we felt were the three strongest gags: (1) a man stranded on a raft receives a package, (2) harassing phone calls force him to throw his cell phone into the ocean, (3) the man abandons his raft to reveal that he was a few feet from land the whole time. In order for us to structure these three events in a way that would make them most effective from a comedic standpoint, we had to insert some sort of causal relationship between them. Ordering and narrating these events in a

logical way would allow us to manipulate the audience's expectations and humor them subverting these expectations. In the first act of the joke we would establish the premise of the gag, introduce its player's variables, etc. In the second act, we would exaggerate these conditions. And in the third act we would surprise the audience, somehow, by subverting or inverting the situations. This conditioning of the material is the basis for an extremely significant comedic principle: the rule of threes.

The magic of 3:

In order to turn a typical sketch into a minimal story we must insert a formula into the sketch structure. That formula is the rule of three's. In investigating the mysterious link between comedy and narrative, the rule of threes is the Rosetta stone. On a small scale it explains how a joke is the same as an anecdote, on a larger scale how a sketch can be the same as a minimal story, and on the largest scale how a comedic and narrative structure can be one in the same. Halpern recognized the rule of threes but was unable to explain it:

For some inexplicable reason, things are funnier when they happen three times. Two isn't enough, four is too many, but the third time something happens, it usually gents a laugh. This is a basic, but mysterious, rule of comedy. The same mechanism in the brain that likes to see patterns seems to thrive on this "rule of threes." (Halpern 89)

To challenge what Halpern says, here, the rule of threes is no mystery. The pattern formed by the rule is one that seduces the viewer by strategically establishing and altering their expectations. In the first stage of the joke, like the example given from SSMF (above), the parameters of the gag are set and an expectation is created. The variables of the "raft" gag were its desperate stranded character and the unusual conditions of his situation: he was stranded at sea, yet was receiving mail. The terms of this situation were exaggerated in the second act, when

we realized that not only was the “stranded” man receiving mail, but he also had a cellular telephone in his possession, a fact that strengthens the correlation between the desperation of the man’s situation and its causation, the character’s brazen ignorance. The character neglects to use his resources, (the mail system and the cell phone) to communicate with the outside world, explain his failure to save himself from isolation. The hyperbolic treatment of the conditions of the joke in the second act, characterize the joke further and fortify the audience’s expectation of this continued behavior. However, in the third act, or the punch line, the audience’s expectations are subverted when the man receives an invitation to a wedding⁸ and thus abandons the raft to swim to shore, ten feet away. When the camera pulls back to reveal that the man was only a few feet from land the whole time, the conditions of the gag have been turned upside down and the viewer is humored by the sensation of surprise resulting from this ambush on their expectations.

Surprise:

The third event in the gag is usually the one of highest importance. The “surprise” factor is the payoff, in terms of humor effect, for the investment in the rule of threes. Humor theorist William Lang subscribed so dearly to the surprise factor of a joke that he devised a system of evaluating the validity of a joke. The system was based on its incorporation of elements that properly establish a sense of expectation and surprise an audience. This test is not surprisingly based on a rule of threes or the comedic “triple” as Lang called it, and views the rule as the perfect way to frame and destroy an audience’s comedic expectation. Helitzer explains the test in this passage:

⁸ The bride of the wedding is a significant figure in the characters past and thus further explains another narrative thread that we will later examine.

According to a comedy theory developed by William Lang, a triple is one of the most perfect formats for a joke, because there are only three parts to most comedic bits. I call these three elements humor's PAP test:

P= preparation (the situation setup)

A= Anticipation (triple)

P= Punch line (story payoff)

(Helitzer 117)

Many humor theorists, like Lang, subscribe to the notion that this element of surprise is not only an extremely valuable one in humor creation, but that it is the basis for most, if not all humor. If the rule of threes is a magical formula for explaining the natural link between comedy and narrative, surprise is the secret ingredient. In both story and joke telling, there is a need for surprise in the third act. The third act/event "payoff" is another reward for the audience's engagement in a text and by justifying their engagement in many ways attributes to their satisfaction with the text. "The elements of 'surprise,' 'shock,' 'suddenness,' or 'unexpectedness' have been regarded by many theorists as necessary (though not necessarily sufficient) conditions for the humor experience," says humor theorist Patricia Keith-Spiegel. (Spiegel in Helitzer 1984, P. 19). Can one explain the effectiveness of a joke's "surprise" factor? What makes surprise funny and not just surprising?

As Helitzer explains, the reason surprise is so effective in humor is that like incongruity, it causes a temporary discomfort in the viewer's mind. "We laugh most often to cover our feelings of embarrassment. We really do! This can be a result of either (1) having unintentionally done or said something foolish, or (2) having been tricked" (Helitzer 1987, p. 17). The difference

between the two theoretical concepts is that the discomfort caused by an incongruity is generally a cerebral one brought on by the inexplicability of an image, whereas the discomfort caused by surprise is an emotional response brought on by the spontaneous presentation of the unexpected.

Still, Spiegel links the two theories closely due to their like effect in forcing a change in one's plane of thought:

There is some similarity between the concepts of surprise and incongruity that both involve an instantaneous breaking up of the routine course of thought or action. It is, therefore, not unusual to find many theorists utilizing a blend of surprise and incongruity in explanatory concepts. (Spiegel in Helitzer 1984, P. 19)

If these two theories of humor are closely related then it is no wonder that we are revisiting them in our analysis of the explanation for the creation of narrative. Just as we examined the effectiveness in implementing incongruities, through linking techniques, we now understand surprise to be a tool that we can implement into our narrative structure on a small or large scale. Koestler believed that the surprise effect was a necessary one in creating humor whether on a narrative level or not. Much like he endorsed connectivity for its pleasure-inducing effect on both audiences and writers upon discovery, Koestler certified the surprise effect as a staple for conveying humor:

Humor depends primarily on its surprise effect: the bisociative shock. To causes surprise the humorist must have a modicum of originality- the ability to break away from the stereotyped routines of thought. Caricaturist, satirist, the writer of nonsense-humor, and even the expert tickler, each operates on more than one plane. Whether his purpose is to convey a social message, or merely to entertain, he must provide mental jolts, caused by the collision of incompatible matrices. To any given situation or subject he must conjure

up an appropriate- or appropriately inappropriate- intruder which will provide the jolt.

(Koestler 92)

Implementing surprise or surprising elements into a comedic script is, like other humor theory concepts, something that can be consciously and methodically approached. As mentioned before, the surprise effect of a gag is wholly dependent upon the audience's expectations. Therefore the critical step in this process is establishing certain elements at the beginning of a sequence, as we did with the "raft" sequence. "The techniques that most often trigger surprise are misdirection, when you trap the audience, and incongruity, which is most effective when the audience is fully aware of all the facts," says Helitzer (Helitzer 1987, P. 17). And once the audience is "aware of all the facts" we must wow them. This is most commonly done with an inversion. Simply put, using an inversion presents the conditions that we established before in a reversed form. An inversion is a flip on the audience's expectations. Horton attested to the value of inversion as a prescriptive method of generating laughs, "Turn most things or situations upside down or inside out, and through inversion, you have laughs. Think how many memorable comedies are based non this simple device" (Horton 26)

In the third act of the "raft" gag we reversed the conditions of the joke. During the first two acts, we introduced and intensified the notion that the man was in a desperate situation, stranded at sea, and illogically neglecting his communicative resources (the phone; mail service, etc.). In the third act, we reversed this condition, revealing that the man was not at sea at all, but in a small pond, surrounded by land. The man's annoyance by his ringing cell phone, now made a bit more sense, or at least did not lack complete sense. By flipping the situation, we made the illogical logical.

A joke IS a story:

In many cases, the more surprising the punch line is, the more effective a joke or gag is. By implementing the anticipation/surprise mechanism into the gag we have given it a small dramatic arc. Surprise in the third act is a necessary ingredient for completing the arc of this semi-story. “A joke is a story, and a surprise ending is almost always its finale,” offers Helitzer (19). Helitzer’s suggestion, here, echoes the notion, again, that the natural structure for joke telling is one that mirrors the three-act structure of a traditional narrative, in its simplest form. As Palmer explains, organizing the sequence of jokes into these effective stages is inherently an act that leads us into narrative:

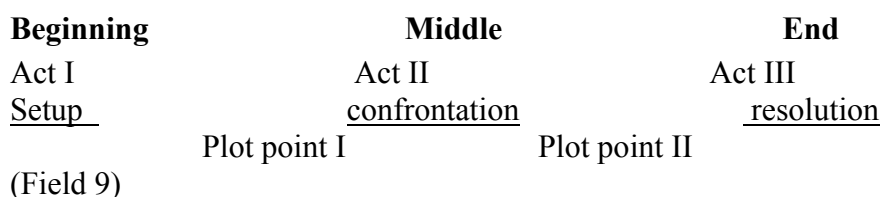
The basic modality of organization of a sequence of gags is that one gag is incorporated into the next in the form either of the basis for perpetua of succeeding gag, or as the basis for one part or another of its syllogism. Now the result of this form of organization is that any given sequence of gags is in fact a narrative in itself, albeit a miniature one indeed, the very form of organization for the single gag on the basis of two chronologically distinct stages – preparation and punch line- implies that a single gag itself is already a narrative, albeit a narrative of a single event (Palmer 143)

In order to appreciate the similarity between a joke structure and narrative structure, it is necessary to review the basic modality of a three-act story. In the first act of a narrative film, the characters are introduced and a precipitating event presents a conflict or problem that will lead us into the second act. This inciting incident is known as a plot point. In the second act the conflict is heightened by factors that raise the stakes of importance. The characters are tormented by this problem and reach a peak point of distress or anguish, where it appears the problem can no longer be remedied. This moment of the story is the second plot point that triggers the third

act. The third act is one in which the problem is somehow remedied, despite the overwhelming unlikelihood of the hero's success (this is usually the surprise) and the characters are returned to a state of happiness. Screenwriting guru Syd Field diagramed this structure in his book,

Screenplay:

Structure is what holds the story in place. It is the relationship between these parts that holds the entire screenplay, the whole together. If a screenplay were a painting hanging on the wall, this is what it would look like:



There is an old metaphor for this structure that says: in act I you get your hero up in a tree, in act II, you throw stones at him, and in act three you get him down. The gist of the three-act structure is the nature of its three movements, act I, the setup, act II, the conflict, and act III the resolution. By now one must begin to see how the arc of the joke and story-structures mirror each other. This reflection, I feel, is no coincidence but rather a convincing exhibit of evidence of the natural relationship between comedy and narrative.

Conclusion

The beginning of this chapter observed Palmer's hypothesis that narrative and comedy existed outside of each other and were forces that one used to aid the other. What this chapter set out to prove was that the forces not only used each other, but also in many ways were naturally pieces of each other and possibly one in the same. Just because you are writing a three-act structure does not mean you cannot make the structure itself funny. Just because you are writing a strictly comedic sequence, does not mean that you can't structure it like a narrative.

There are, however, some legitimate grounds for arguing against the incorporation of a three-act joke structure in a sketch. As you may remember from the previous chapter, the Python's rejection of ending a sketch with a climatic event or a "zinger" was the basis for inventing the unorthodox style of telling jokes the program originally incorporated:

We'd seen Peter Cook and Dudley Moore doing so many really great sketches where they traditionally had to end with a zinger, and the zinger was never as good as the sketch. (Gilliam in Morgan 37)

The Pythons rejection of the "zinger" or climatic event was in accordance with their initial rejection of narrative structure. Python's original shows had no narrative thread and thus no need to embed narrative structure into sketches, either. However, while Python's early intentions were to fragment narrative, my journey has led me to discovering ways to piece narrative back together. And in order to re-learn the narrative, we must re-insert the "zinger."

A second consideration that we must recognize is that the element of "surprise" is not the end all prescription for comedy in any situation. Surprise as a comedic element is one with a shelf life. And as earlier this paper asked why surprise was not the only comedic element; the truth of the matter is that the audience can only be surprised so much. "You'll notice that appreciation of any piece of humor decreases rapidly through repeated exposure, or when the ending is predictable," says Helitzer (Heltitzer 17 Comedy Writing Secrets). Spiegel further explains this phenomenon:

One of the most striking aspects of reactions to humor is adaptation to a given stimulus.

When novelty of surprise is eliminated, or if a joke is remembered, the reaction to a humorous situation is altered. Thus writers incorporating surprise into their theories have

the advantage of being able to account for the decline in appreciation level on repeated exposures to the same situation. (Spiegel in Helitzer 19)

Indeed this element must be used somewhat sparingly and always strategically in order to capitalize on its effectiveness. This strategic placing of the elements is one of the chief motives for incorporating a narrative structure in a comedic text. Narrative, as I see it, is a way to maximize the effect of our jokes and gags, rather than a convenient way to stock and shelf them. By breaking down comedic elements into the rawest sense and then patching them back together, I almost feel that *SSMF* has been a celebration of the narrative. Perhaps Gabler would crown me a bona-fide connoisseur:

Whether or not the desire for narrative is a primal need, real appreciation of narratives is something acquired. Weaned on sensation through those movie noise boxes, MTV and every other product of our bigger, faster, louder, aesthetic, young viewers in particular haven't had the opportunity to gain that kind of appreciation. (Gabler 22)

Chapter 4: **How Narrative?**

The premise of this paper is largely to explain the emergence of narrative in the sketch comedy show, *SSMF*. I would therefore be betraying this premise if I were not to specifically outline how the program's structure evolved throughout the progression of episodes and how these episodes are typically constructed. I already described on a small scale how many scattered comedic elements can be brought together by the use of linking devices. I have also outlined how a small story arc can be embedded into sketches by strategically orienting gags to a more narrative structure. Yet, while these examples display how to connect smaller pieces into larger ones, they do not fully explain how to unite these larger groups together to complete the puzzle.

This chapter will investigate what organizational and creative methods we, as *SSMF*'s creators, used that led us to narrative. It will explore grand linking structures, devices utilized in our early episodes for the sake of introducing continuity between unrelated sketches. It will show how we explored causal relationships between comedic elements in order to further the narrative in our scripts. This chapter will outline the specific steps taken in the construction of *SSMF* scripts. And finally, this chapter will suggest some guidelines for evaluating the narrative aspects of an *SSMF* script, after it is completed.

Our (SSMF) evolving format

In the beginning there was no formal structure in any *Spider Monkey Episodes*. The show simply displayed unrelated black out sketches. Then, as chapter two details, we discovered linking devices and implemented them to flow sketches together in a stream of consciousness.

Yet, it was not until later shows that a consistent format began to arise in *Spider Monkey* episodes. Format furthered the emerging narrative structure by organizing and utilizing links to make loose ideas coherent and by assigning causality to random events. There were two major facets of *SSMF*'s changing format that contributed to the shows conversion to a narrative structure: (1) the use of grand linking structures and the (2) implementation of causal relations between comedic elements. Though the use of links was the primary driving force in the emergence of narrative in *SSMF*, it was the above mentioned items that orchestrated links into story.

Grand linking structures:

For *SSMF*, making a story out of unrelated sketches was prefaced by our desire to give shows more continuity. Without the ability to at least create continuity between comedic elements, we would never have found ourselves creating a story between them. One effective way to unify the sketches in our script to attain continuity was using grand linking structures. Grand linking structures are ways sketches are arranged and tied to one another to suggest or articulate some level of continuity between them.

Grand linking structures came to use in *SSMF* gradually over the course of two or three years. I have mentioned, exhaustively, that *SSMF*'s early format borrowed from the *Python* format. Mostly what was borrowed from *Python*, in terms of the overall structures of an episode, was the simple notion that sketches could be related to one another (Chapter 2), though the precise structure of this relationship, in *Python*'s case, was seldom defined. Early *SSMF* episodes (3-7) linked sketches together with transitions between sketches and occasional reoccurring references, only. In other words, though sketches flowed together, they did not relate to one another in some overarching explicable manner. This format was more of a disjointed stream of

consciousness, where ideas merged into one another, but with little to no causality. Jokes and characters would slide from one sketch to the next, yet never revisit their previous context.

By the third season, or eighth episode, we wanted to make *SSMF* episodes more coherent and more defined in ways that would satisfy both us, as the creators, and audiences with a sense of understanding. Personally, I wanted to give each *Spider Monkey* episode a distinctive identity, as if they were Beatles albums. To me, it was alright for audiences to be temporarily disoriented, but I wanted them to leave the show satisfied. I strove to find ways to give episodes thematic identity, while continuing to connect things. I suspected that these connections could be utilized in enhancing a show's individual theme. It was on episode 8 that I really felt this goal had been achieved.

During the conception of episode 8, we wrote five completely unrelated sketches, with little regard to any recurring elements or linking devices. As the author of the final shooting script, I linked sketches together by creating one consistent setting or central locale we would return to between sketches. The central locale for this episode was a parodied game show setting that poked fun at the reality program, *Survivor*. In between each sketch, the *Spider Monkey* cast would vote to remove a member of the show from the "Island" set. "The Silly Survivor Fiasco," as this episode was called, was the first *Spider Monkey* show to receive any critical acclaim. A review in the school's newspaper, *The Red and Black*, dubbed me the "brain father" and claimed "the whole crew may be ones to watch, just to say you knew them in the early day." (Reed 1).

Using the central locale proved to be a useful grand linking device and an invaluable part of the evolving *Spider Monkey Format*. For the next few shows we devised several of these "home bases" to unify episodes. Amongst the central locales for other episodes were a dumpster

inhabited by homeless people in episode 9, the fictitious “Spider Monkey Awards Ceremony” of episode 11, and the mock MTV video request show, “Total Request Fiasco,” of episode 13.

After using the central locale format with much success for episodes 8-13, we wanted to take steps toward improving the show even further. While the central locale allowed us to give shows a loose theme and tie sketches together in a creative way, it had limits in its creative and entertainment value. For one, the format was predictable. Once a viewer had seen the first sketch and the transition that followed it into the first central locale segment, he/she could perceive how all other elements in the program could inevitably tie together. Needless to say, this limited the surprise factor of many gags and muted the enjoyment of discovering connectivity in others. We aimed, instead, to devise a format that better disguised the relation between elements for a longer period of time, yet still gave audiences a clear understanding of the events transpired by the time the dust had settled at the end of an episode.

The next couple of shows started out very fragmented, with short vignettes that appear disconnected. Yet as the episode went on, one could see linkages appear, and gradually all the elements involved would funnel into one coherent story or semi-story. Episode 14 was the first Spider Monkey show to take on this structure that I call “the funnel.” The structure of this episode, titled “Old School Revenge,” was one that had several unrelated shorts funnel into two stories, one about a boy who loses his little sister, and one about a teenager who commits himself to avenging his high school nemesis. Each sketch in this show, though written separately for its own comedic value, gave attention to changing the course of one of these two plotlines. For example, early in the episode, an infomercial airs advertising a “limb replacement” service that replaces hairy limbs with hairless ones as an alternative to shaving and waxing. Then, in another sketch, a young boy loses his little sister who he was supposed to be watching. In the end

it is revealed that the boy's sister was kidnapped from the "limb replacement company" for her fresh appendages. This is one of several "coincidences" that emerges late in the episodes as all comedic elements in episode 14 began to intersect into one climatic finish.

Episode 15, "A Wedding Story," one-upped the narrative force of the previous episode, by having every sketch ultimately tie into one central plot line, rather than two. In the show's opening moments we see seemingly unrelated "black out" shorts that are actually a means of introducing the main characters involved in the story, three men and a woman. In the second act of the show, we revisit each of these characters and join them in their own respective flashbacks. These flashbacks reveal all three male characters at some point were in love with the same woman. In the show's concluding wedding scene each of the three men attempts to take the woman's hand in marriage.

Causality:

We have already addressed how to make a sketch into its own self-contained story, but how can sketches be made into pieces of a larger story? For one, we can organize them into grand linking structures. Yet grand linking structures only partially, explain or justify the relations between sketches. How do we make the sketches in "the funnel" funnel? What brings them together? While central locales explain what the sketches loosely have in common, they rarely fully justify the intricacies of each sketch. In order for the show to have a stronger narrative thread, these intricacies must be defined. Characters must have reasons for there actions. Events must have reasons for their being displayed. In order for a sketch comedy show to make the leap to narrative, things must have causality.

Chapter three's examination of three act structures cited Prince's definition of minimal story. In this definition Prince identified the first event of a minimal story as a stative one, the

second as active, and the third as the inverse of the first. Prince also noted that in order for these events to constitute a minimal story, the events would have to have a specific relationship with one another (Prince in Rimmon-Kennan 18). In commenting on this definition, Rimmon-Kennon gives us a clearer understanding of the values it stresses, “The above definition requires three principles of organization: (1) temporal succession; (2) causality; (3) inversion (which I take to be one of several forms of closure based on symmetry and balance)” (Rimmon-Kennan 40).

We addressed the first and third principle in the previous chapter. While we did not address causality directly, we certainly can say that the “raft sketch” example, given in the previous chapter, displays causality in some capacity. In order to create a grand narrative from our disjointed sketches, we must establish causality from sketch to sketch. Lietch backs this notion of causality professing, “Causality is an important criterion for narrative because “a random set of events cannot be a story” (Lietch 8). Often, in the central locale format, the central locale provides a loose causality for the sketches (i.e., sketches in the “awards show” turned out to be the “clips” of nominated films). Yet, when we eliminated the central locale it presented us with a new challenge: finding the justification for one sketch not within a central locale, but within another sketch.

In the “raft sketch” illustrated in the previous chapter, we showed some causality within the framework of the sketch. The man had a cell phone because it was delivered to him in a package in a previous scene. The man threw the phone in the water because it kept ringing and annoying him. But in assembling the show’s overall arc, we had to provide some causality for the sketch's existence itself. Why were we showing this man on a raft? How did he get onto the raft? Why would we care if he gets off the raft? We answered these questions by inserting context clues and whole scenes themselves, justifying the character's and sketch's existence.

Sequentially, the first of these justifications occurs during the second “act” of the gag. After the man throws his telephone into the water he screams out, “Damn it, I’m never going to get off of this stupid raft!” While the line is intended to demonstrate the man’s stupidity, it also suggests the character's motivation. The viewer now has something of a goal in mind for the character “to get off the raft” and some interest in seeing whether or not he will achieve this goal. But why the character is on the raft is still yet to be justified. This question is answered in the ensuing moments after the “raft man’s” outburst, when he pulls a picture out of his wallet. The picture is of a young woman and him from another time. We slowly dissolve into a flashback as we hear raft boy recite the line, “Wait for me, Shelly,” to himself.

As we mentioned earlier, the flashback will reveal that “raft boy” was once in love with the female protagonist, and by the end of the episode we will see him attempt to reclaim his love. The flashback reveals how the man got stranded in the water. In the flashback “raft boy,” who goes by the name “David” stands on a bridge with “Shelly.” David drops to one knee and proposes to Shelly who in a nervous response accidentally flicks the engagement ring into the water. After chastising Shelly for losing the ring, David jumps into the water after it where we presume he stays until the present. Again, it is absurd logic, but logic nonetheless.

By giving causality to this sketch, we began to weave the sketches of this show together with a narrative thread. In the next scene we see Shelly alone and tormented from the memory. She meets a new guy, who eventually proposes to her. When David receives an invitation to the wedding (via the mail service to his raft we already established) he becomes enthralled enough to swim to shore (all of ten feet away).

Threading together the other loose sketches in this episode was done in a similar manner. We were able to bring the other two characters into the same central plotlines, by applying

similar means. Like “David’s” sketches, the sketches depicting the other characters were justified with flashbacks showing causality for their existence.

Like grand linking structures the concept of causality is closely tied to links. In some ways inserting a causal relationship between comedic elements is itself a link. Or perhaps one could view causality as the configurational element explaining an incongruity. If we have a character appear in the show, which we saw earlier, there must be some causal explanation for this link in order for the story to progress. If links, such as these, are not explained, the narrative of the show hits a dead end and one can only assume the link that they saw was a random occurrence.

Our (SSMF) Writing Process

While this paper is not intended to be a “how to” guide to writing comedy, it is necessary to review the process my colleagues and I have used to write *SSMF* in order to better understand the emergence of narrative in *SSMF*. Earlier, I spoke of how to link sketches and scenes. I also spoke of how to sculpt our sketches in a way to give them a narrative arc. But, I did not simply inherit the comedic material we are engaging with. It must also be synthesized in a strategic process. There are several specific steps in our writing process which fall under two general phases: idea development and idea organization. Though these two phases occasionally overlap, for the most part they do not, primarily because they demand the creator to utilize two different kinds of thought processes: divergent thinking and convergent thinking. Divergent thinking is a more additive thought process, where an idea is expanded upon and the many possibilities it holds are explored. As Derks puts it:

(...) divergent thinking is defined as producing a variety of responses in which the product is not completely determined by the information given to the respondent.

Guilford considered that semantic transformations (puns) are evidence of divergent thinking, as well as one important source of wit and humor. (Derks 847)

The opposite of this kind of thought process is convergent thinking. Convergent thinking is an organizational manner of thinking where useful ideas are consolidated and non-useful ones are dismissed. Understanding the differences in thought processes for each stage of writing helps one appreciate why our writing process follows certain rituals.

Development

Development is the early phase in the writing process where ideas are generated. This phase contains two steps: pitching and brainstorming. Before any concept or premise for an episode has ever been defined, ideas are pitched between cast members in a cozy living room setting. Usually, cast members have gathered ideas individually, after recording their own humorous observations of the outside world. After about a month we all return from a short sabbatical with lists in hand. For several hours we share these observations and ideas with one another. The interactive sharing of ideas naturally cultivates new ones.

Pitching:

Pitching is an energetic and playful activity and rarely, in our case, a competitive one. Negativism in any form is strongly discouraged, if not prohibited. The reason being that in this step of the writing process, criticism serves no functional purpose. Ideas, whether good or bad, are embraced. If an idea is embraced, it can only be added to or developed in the act of justifying its existence, and cast members frequently add to each other's ideas. A more developed comedic idea is usually a better one. Halpern applied this principle to her study of improv comedy stating, "Since one of the most important responsibilities of an improviser is justifying what his fellow

players say and do, everything that happens on stage is used to build the scenes- so there can't be mistakes if it's all accepted" (Halpern 74).

Brainstorming:

After everyone has pitched all the ideas they wish, we generally begin brainstorming. Cast members gravitate to the ideas the group seems most enthusiastic about. The popular ideas are embraced as the group joins together in creating as many different variations on each as possible. Stocking ourselves with a plethora of variations of the same ideas, gives us ample ammunition for turning these related ideas into a sketch or scene later. Here are some of my reflections upon a recent brainstorming meeting:

Journal 4

Feb 7, 2004

I have just come back from the second "development" meeting for our new show. This meeting is typically a "brainstorming" meeting, where we try to embrace and add to ideas that were born in the first "pitch" meeting. The concept of embracing and nourishing an idea makes me think of Halpern's book, which is devoted wholly to accepting every idea proposed and nurturing it. According to Halpern, there are no bad ideas and as long as everyone gives effort to help cultivate an idea together, it will be good. I am still not convinced of this. I feel largely that some ideas are predisposed, by their funny nature, to be better for developing than others. If these comedic ideas were children it would bring us back to the nature vs. nurture argument. Are all ideas born with genes of equal merit? Are the successful ideas the ones that have been raised and privileged? Are there ideas that are doomed to fail or succeed no matter what the group's treatment of them is? How can you tell if some ideas are better than others? "Saturday Night Live" selects sketch ideas to develop simply on the basis of which sketches get the most laughs

when spoken aloud as a one sentence pitch. I don't agree with this either. This method simply determines which sketch is the funniest single sentence summary of itself. I tend to select which comedic ideas that I like by closing my eyes for a few second and imaging different directions to take with it in my head. But I guess, in essence what I am doing is simply holding a brainstorming meeting in my head. This method has obvious flaws as well.

Organizing Ideas

Grouping:

Grouping is the valuable next phase in writing, and the first step taken in laying the structural foundations for our script. Many times, groups of comedic ideas are formed by the discovery of similarities between scattered ideas. Other times idea clusters are generated in development by adding on to a single comedic idea. If the comedic and/or narrative structure of our script will hold, it must be first fortified with a breadth of related comedic ideas. In her book, *Writing Comedy*, Mary Anne Rischel instructs readers to “cluster common areas” as an initial step towards organizing ideas into a comedic script. “After you’ve daydreamed about your topic and written down random lists of details,” Rischel says, “focus your ideas by circling the ones that fit a single point, scene, or character” (Rischel 117).

By grouping common comedic ideas, I can begin to see the show’s identity unfolding in front of me. Character motives, genres, locations, and other comedic tendencies emerge when the similarities between comedic ideas are revealed. If writing a script were solving a crime, clustering ideas is a way of analyzing the crime scene. Like common traces of evidence, left behind, clustered ideas hint that a big clue may lie below the unscathed surface.

By the time common ideas have been clustered, we have generally concluded the group writing phases of a particular episode. At this point, I generally take a large poster board full of

these grouped comedic ideas home with me and study them, trying to figure out how to make them into one tangible and coherent piece. This journal entry captures my thought process during this phase of my most recent script:

Journal Entry:

Yesterday I began organizing ideas for our new show into categories: characters, running jokes, sketches, and visual ideas. By now our group has become familiar with all the ideas, so I can post them all into shorthand titles onto our listserv. There, our group members will be able to see all of these ideas and play with them, as we continue to reach towards composing a script. One of the first steps in organizing this script is grouping all the similar ideas. Though I have always used this method, I came across it again being suggested in Rischel's book as a way to get started in writing a comedic script. My paper talks a bit about the linkages and connections made between jokes, characters, and other references in the final product. I suspect that certain connections between elements I will make now will plant the seeds for links that will arise in the final product. It is during this infant stage of the writing process that many of these linkages are first discovered. While making a comprehensive list of all of our ideas yesterday I discovered certain magnetisms between ideas. Sometimes it is a simple bisociation of words and objects. A sketch about a man stealing a pie from the window can be grouped with a joke about getting pied in the face. Sometimes it is a bit more abstract. Once these ideas are grouped the show begins to emerge. Many of our ideas seem to relate somehow to detective work. Perhaps this show will turn into a crime caper? Not because we will set out to write one, but because one will emerge. I suppose you have to let the jokes guide you. Whatever combinations are the ones that are funniest are the ones that are sewn together. Maybe this is the key to marrying narrative and comedy.

Categorizing:

Categorizing comedic ideas is a more specific way of grouping and a more advanced organizational method. Categorizing requires strictly convergent thinking, as I begin to compartmentalize every one of these comedic gems. The first step in categorizing ideas was taken during the pitch meeting. While recording each pitched idea onto the poster boards, I or someone else places them into one of five categories: characters, running gags, sketch scenarios, short scenarios, and technical/production ideas. This practice is revisited in this interim phase of structuring the script.

Though our idea clusters many times transcend the comedic categories specified in our lists, the compartmentalization of them is still quite effective in determining what each idea's function will be within a scene or sketch. Often, a group of ideas will encompass an ample amount of material needed to begin writing the scene. The cluster we have formed may encompass strong characters, a promising scenario, and inventive production notes for shooting it. However, if a sketch idea is lacking something, the compartments created earlier may be very helpful in figuring out what is missing. It is not entirely necessary to have a representative from every group in each cluster before one is allowed to begin writing a scene or sketch based on that cluster. But it is necessary to have labeled most if not all comedic ideas before hand, in order to determine what comedic ideas are available and what their function is.

Categorization can also help in utilizing ideas that exist outside of clusters. Suppose there are five or so character ideas on our list that appear to be unrelated to anything else previously pitched. Should these ideas be dismissed because they don't seem to have anything in common with other groups? Strong comedic characters are precious and must be giving a home. The gist of the categorizing phase is to find a home for single, orphan ideas. "Try putting this character in

this scene,” I will tell myself “What if the ‘extra’ in the background was a highly engaging character from our list?” As we know from earlier chapters, putting unlike ideas and images together often synthesizes new humor and putting an odd character, a fish out of water, into an unusual situation is no exception to this guideline.

One time, we were faced with an excess of such characters in our development of a script. At first, we had no idea what to do with a list of some twenty-five hilarious characters we devised in a brainstorming meeting. Finally, we gave up on finding a home for all of these characters and instead sought to build a roof over these orphans. “But what could they all have in common?” I wondered, searching for a sketch scenario that would encompass them all. The answer was obvious: they were all rejected characters. We wound up tying the entire show around a theme of rejected characters. Categorizing ideas and recognizing the unbalance of categories can bring to our attention strong comedic elements that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Lists to Sketches:

When I finally begin writing sketches or scenes, I carry with me what I call “shopping lists.” A shopping list usually contains a rough breakdown of the suggested location, character, scheme, and events of a scene. The shopping list informs me if a scene or sketch is missing anything. Filling in the missing pieces on the list is half the battle in writing the scene or sketch. The other half is simply figuring out what these things have in common. In order for me to figure out why a character takes a course of action, I may need to write that action or dialogue into the scene. The writing in this case is merely an act of explaining the relation between seemingly unrelated elements. Does this sound familiar?

Another crucial part of writing a scene or sketch is editing. Many times, I will find myself staring at a sketch with six or seven variations on the same comedic idea. This is usually too much material (1) because it calls for a longer sketch that will eventually lose the audience's attention and (2) because it will be difficult to sculpt into any sort of narrative structure. As we assessed in the last chapter, it is more effective to give a sketch or scene a short but progressive arc than to use it as a display model for an endless pit of related jokes. The remedy for this bleeding wound of jokes is quite simple. I generally select the three best variations display the two that are most similar first, and their opposite last. If there is no opposite initially presented to me from a prior list of gags, then I select two strong gags and create a new one by inverting them. If I do not have two similar gags on my list, then I pick a strong one and exaggerate it to form a second gag. And then, of course, the third gag is the reversal of the first two. However cultivated, the scene has three distinct events, an initial gag, an exaggeration, and an inversion. The scene now has something of a comedic and/or narrative arc.

Back to Three's:

Now that the scenes have an internal three-act structure, how can this structure be implemented into the overall episode structure? First, as writers, must ask ourselves what the main event and actions of the show are? What significant events happen in the show and can they be traced to three main movements? Generally analyzing the significant events of the story require one to first decide which character(s) seem to be the most important in the episode. Which character(s) appear the most? Which character(s) have been developed the most? Which character(s) have the power to change the course of action in our show? Which character(s) do we follow in and out of sketches? Sometimes we find we have only followed one main protagonist throughout the show and every sketch somehow affected or explained his actions, as

is the case of “Joe” in episode 16. In this situation, we only have one central plotline and must determine when and how the character was introduced, what conflicts he encountered, and how he overcame them. These are the three main acts of our central narrative.

Other times, we may discover all the sketches somehow tell the story of two or more characters. In this case, we recognize parallel plotlines that must also be explained in three central movements. Often, this is done by dividing the three acts within sketches into their own individual scenes (i.e., the three gags in the “raft sketch”) and interchangeably rotating them in and out of display with the other parallel plots. In other words, act one of episode 15, “A Wedding Story,” shows the first movement in each of three sketches, or the introduction of three different characters. Act two shows a conflict arising in these character’s lives. In this episode's case, each character’s conflict involves one another as they are all in love with the same woman. In this third act, or last movement in each sketch, we begin to see how each character will attempt to solve his/her conflict. Each character’s sketch ends (“raft boy” finally gets off his raft!) leading to one climatic scene, where all these plots will intersect and each character’s plot will be resolved: the wedding.

One must remember that this formula is a flexible one. You may find a sketch has more than one three-act gags, or that each section of the larger three act plot has its own three-act movement. The rule of threes is not an all-encompassing law that all elements in the script must adhere to. It is simply a helpful guideline for making both jokes and stories concise, engaging, and progressive.

Gluing it all together:

Ironically, in my exploration narrative form, I have presented many different related ideas in non-chronological form. And now that I have come to the last stage of the writing process, I realize it is a step that has already been explained several times over: linking.

In order to complete the script at the point of the writing phase when the majority of the scenes have already been written, I must figure out how to link the material that is still unrelated. In terms of linking the larger scenes themselves, I must use grand linking structures to place the scenes and transitions to seal them together. When, micromanaging the script, tying loose ends between lingering show elements and smoothing out transitions between unrelated scenes, we use the plethora of linking methods suggested in chapter two. In order to link things conceptually I must embed references in the script to explain events taking place at different times in the show. There are many actions one can take in order to stitch down the loose ends of the script. The more developed the script is, the less linking there is left to do. Linking is a process that follows us from the start of our script to the finish. One must remember in many cases it is the match making that causes the incongruities, inventing the basis for the jokes themselves.

But is there a Story?

Since this paper is devoted to explaining the “emergence of narrative,” it is essential to outline ways to evaluate whether or not a narrative structure is present in our scripts. The truth is, in the case of *SSMF*, narrative structure is usually not something built before writing the script, but instead recognized afterwards. By the time everything in the show has been linked together, we know there is a thread running through the script. But is it a narrative thread? How can we tell?

Is there a protagonist?

First, we must ask ourselves about the nature of our characters? Is there one distinct protagonist? Someone who connects, or is connected by, the sketches? If not, how can we make the sketches, where he/she is not present, serve some purpose in the protagonist's life? Like I mentioned earlier in the paper, our last two episodes called for the incorporation of such a protagonist in "Joe." We never really set out to write "Joe's" story, but we would often ask ourselves, "What does this scene have to do with Joe?" or "How does this effect Joe?" Asking these questions was a way to tie down lingering show elements to the strongest and most fully developed parts of the show. Plots and subplots tended to appear before us in answering these questions.

Did the protagonist change?

Once we have determined whether or not we have a main character stringing together our story, we must determine whether this character changed. As we have already established, a three-act story structure is based upon a trajectory in which conflict is introduced, heightened, and resolved. The character must be the one who experiences and addresses this conflict if there is to be a story found in the script. The first time we used Joe, in episode 14, we introduced him as a social invalid. Pestered and teased throughout the show, Joe's situation worsened until the third act, when he vindicated himself and went from "Joe Shmoe" to "Joe Cool."

Does everything have a purpose?

Perhaps the most telling sign of a strong narrative is an identified purpose for almost every element in the script. The biggest difference between a narrative and sketch format is in a regular sketch show comedic elements do not need a purpose other than being funny. Does that mean non-narrative elements are not funny? Of course it doesn't. This paper has outlined many ways narrative devices can enhance humor. Therefore, it comes quite naturally that the majority

of devices found in our scripts are inherently both narrative and comedic in nature. Our last complete episode, at press time, episode 16, was one I found to be our strongest in narrative structure. Though we only set out half-heartedly to do so, nearly every element of the script eventually served some sort of purpose in advancing the narrative. Even ideas we set out to keep separate from the story, eventually and naturally flowed back in to the grand scheme of things. One such gag was a series of infomercials for wacky inventions we had no intention of incorporating into the narrative. Yet when the time came to explain how Joe came up with an award-winning science fair project, the natural and funniest answer to this question was that he stole the idea for one of the wacky infomercials we saw earlier in the episode. The infomercial gag was the funniest scenario because of its bisociation with an earlier comedic scenario. It was the most natural solution because the infomercial gag was the only one left in the show that was not explained by or incorporated into the narrative.

So what?

It is not inconceivable one could come to this phase of writing and find there is no narrative in the script. And if there is no narrative, then so what? Remember, we never set out to write stories. Stories found us. The paper is aimed at explaining the emergence of narrative, not an instruction for writing one. There are many books and other literatures that better and more elaborately explain this concept of writing narrative than I did in the previous few paragraphs. What I have explained is how we have written *SSMF* scripts in the past and the model for how we continue to write them.

Conclusion

Over the course of four years *The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco*'s evolving format took them from a "black out" structure to a narrative one. This evolution had several phases marked by four significant changes in grand linking structure: stream of consciousness, central locale, the funnel, and finally one central narrative. Though links were the driving force and essential ingredient in this evolution, it was only through grand linking structure and the implementation of causal relationships that links could be orchestrated into a cohesive format.

The writing process of *Spider Monkey* episodes is reflective of the show's evolution on a small scale. Like the show's early format, the typical episode construction begins with a scattered pile of unrelated ideas. Links are made; ideas are grouped; and then categorized by their function, as a blueprint of the episode is devised out of categories and "shopping lists." The final script is written as a response to unexplained gaps in the blue print.

One should be cautioned that the methods outlined in this chapter are not universal guidelines to script writing. The materials presented in this chapter are explanations of and reflections upon *SSMF*'s writing process. In addition to these methods, this chapter displayed several ways to evaluate the aspects of narrative of an *SSMF* script. I do not consider this evaluation to be a highly crucial one by which I judge material, but rather a curious one upon which inquiries can be made.

Chapter 5: **Why this paper?**

The general motive of this paper was to explain how narrative emerged over the course of several episodes in the sketch comedy show, *The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco*. This quest had many detours and along the way discovered many principles of humor theory that reinforced and explained this emergence of narrative. I discovered why it was helpful to incorporate narrative into a comedic script. I unveiled the measures that one can take in order to incorporate narrative into a comedic script. And before any of these paths were taken, I sought an internal understanding of the creative process. It is important at this time to review the questions posed at the beginning of this paper and to assess their answers.

Review

The primary question that this paper poses is this: How did narrative emerge, without conscious planning, throughout the course of sixteen episodes in *The Silly Spider Monkey Fiasco*? The short answer to this question is that narrative emerged in this show through the implementation of linking devices. What are linking devices? Links are various techniques employed in a script that connect two unrelated comedic ideas. A link can be a reference to an earlier comedic idea or a transitional sequence that carries one scene or comedic sketch/sequence into the next without disconnect between them. Chapter two provided various theoretical explanations for why audiences and creators enjoy incorporating links.

Chapter three explained why the incorporation of narrative is even necessary or beneficial in a show script. In that chapter, explanations from several narrative theorists provided a rich

argument for the incorporation of narrative in a program. The primary argument made for the incorporation of narrative was that it was an essential “hooking” device or means of engaging the viewer closely with the show’s material. But this explanation raised other inquiries: was narrative this “hooking” device simply a gimmick used to present comedic material? Are comedy and narrative two completely separate entities? And if that was the case, how did narrative naturally emerge in *SSMF* without a conscious agenda, on our part, to use it as a “hooking device?”

Firstly, the notion that narrative and comedy existed separately, was dispelled. We revealed evidence in the structure of joke-telling and minimal narrative structure that suggested a natural relationship between the two. This evidence was based on the notion that the raw structure of a joke or a story was one containing three events. The function of each event is the same in story and joke telling: The first event is an informative one where the elements of the joke or story are introduced. The second event is a hyperbole of the first where the conditions of the preceeding event are brought to an extreme state. And the third event is a surprise based on the inversion of the first two.

Secondly, the question of how narrative emerged from episodes one to sixteen was addressed in chapter four. This emergence was significantly fueled by the incorporation of grand linking structures. Grand linking structures are ways sketches are arranged and tied to one another to suggest or articulate some level of continuity between them. These structures were the constantly changing backbone of the *SSMF* format as it evolved over the course of four years. Another significant factor in the emergence of narrative was the implementation of causality or justification for the existence of show elements and the sketches themselves. The idea of adding causality to sketches overlapped with the implementation of a three-act structure into these

sketches. The factors mentioned above are more complex linking devices. Chapter two outlined all the essential linking devices used in *SSMF* to connect one single idea to the next. Grand linking structures and narrative structure, in general, are larger linking devices that connect and orchestrate smaller links into one larger coherent body.

For me, writing this thesis was an essential exercise in understanding my own creative process and motivations. The consciousness of my inner workings will likely assist me in approaching creative projects from here on. I will be able to better craft my work environment, manage my daily work habits, and assess my involvement in future creative endeavors from a theoretical standpoint. I now have a higher appreciation for my own work, a perspective that allows me to grow as a writer. I know what I have accomplished and why but more importantly I know where to go from here as I charge on into the creative frontier.

In addition to the personal benefits that I gained from writing this paper are the potential benefits that others could gain from reading it. Firstly, those who seek a career in comedic scriptwriting could certain benefit from this study. Just as I sought to appreciate, understand, and emulate *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in order to develop my own writing style, one could analyze either of the shows examined in this paper for the sake of developing their own program. In some ways this paper is a guide to finding one's own comedic style. The principles of humor theory used in this paper such as notions of incongruity, bisociation, configuration, surprise, convergent thinking and divergent thinking are all applicable in the construction of any comedic text. This paper shows writers how to use connections to enhance their scripts. It demystifies the relationship between comedy and narrative and instructs the reader as to how to incorporate one in the other. This paper is a guide to organizing and arranging comedic elements in the manner

that makes them most effective. And in incorporating all of these principles, this paper ultimately aids the writer's ability to engage and satisfy their audience.

Yet the benefits of this paper are not exclusive to the comedy writer. This paper in many ways is a guide to understanding the creative process in general. Therefore, any writer, artist, or person who uses the creative process could apply the knowledge instilled in this paper. One could apply various connective devices to writing a dissertation. One can analyze the narrative structure of a symphony or opera. One can relate notions of creative motivation and discovery to making a grocery list. To me, the big find in this paper was not the creative process in comedy writing, but the creative process in everything. In trying to understand the known world one discovers connectivity in everything; a narrative arc nearly in nearly all things understood.

How this Paper?

Journal Entry #10

Mar 12, 2004

Trevor's (and probably many other people) creative process:

(1) You figure out what you want in the thing (2) You make connections between the things you want in it. (3) You tie up loose ends, look at what you did, and figure out what the hell the thing is.

I discovered my own creative process while writing this paper. The more I began to read over the principles of the creative process, the more I realized that I was semi-consciously applying them to this paper. The process of writing this paper was not unlike the process of writing a comedic script that I outlined in the last chapter. I began with just a general idea of seeking to understand my own writing process. I knew that in order to understand my own writing I would have to analyze *SSMF*, the bulk of my creative output. I knew that in order to

understand the show that I produced, I would first have to investigate the show influences, namely its primary influence: *Monty Python*. I knew that in order to understand the evolution of *SSMF*, I would have to understand the evolution of the *Python* format. I recognized a major moment in both *SSMF* and *Python*'s evolution in the emergence of narrative. I knew that in order to explain the emergence of narrative and the evolution of the shows in general, I would have to understand some humor and narrative theory. Upon reading humor and narrative theory, I realized that I would have to understand some creative theory to help explain the other two as well as to understand my own creative process.

It was not until my paper was nearly complete that I realized it had taken on a three-act structure. Once my research was finished, I had a pretty strong idea of what elements I wished to include into the text, but had not yet understood how they would all tie together. In the first act, I introduced all the players: humor theory, *SSMF*, *Python*, creative theory, narrative theory, etc. I described their background and their tendencies.

In the second act, I sought to understand the relationship between these elements. I knew that in order to link these elements together, I would first need to understand, links in general. Chapter two helped me understand connectivity in the rawest sense; what makes ideas cling together; how fusing together old ideas breeds new one; how to mend and smooth out these connections.

I knew that in order to understand the emergence of narrative that I would have to backtrack to its infant stages, when the show began linking elements. I began to understand the emergence by understanding the creative process. I began to see how things might tie together. Around this time, I was feeling inspired, so I wrote an entry into my journal:

Journal Entry #4

Feb 7, 2004

With each passing day I can feel structure emerging from this paper. Not built from the ground up, but excavated. Today, I read about two key concepts in humor theory and creative theory: divergent and convergent thinking. The first concerns itself with coming up with multiple solutions the same problem, the second with making connections between two separate things. While examining these concepts I began to implement them, immediately in my thinking and planning of this paper. I made connections between the readings on convergent thinking and my own comedic material. And then I thought more about how human beings are always making connections between things to try to make sense of them. I remember also, reading something that Neal Gabler said about how human beings have always used stories to make sense of the world. Thinking convergently again, my mind comes back to how many define creativity itself as the creation of bridges between two different concepts. And yet, all these things seem to be connected. Is that just my imagination running away or are they in fact related? Do we make these connections in vain? Are we simply amusing ourselves when we connect things like an artist who spills paint onto a canvas and then creates a picture based on these erratic markings? Or are we constantly excavating some sort of primordial relationship between all things that already existed? Perhaps there is always an underlying narrative between all things, the story of the universe.

In the third act, I began to look at the connections that I made from afar. I saw groups of things linked together. Then, I figured out what the groups had in common. Once everything was linked, at least in my mind, I began to understand the narrative arc in this thread of ideas; that

these concepts were tied in a certain way for a certain reason; that there was an inherent story in this paper. It was the story of how I learned to understand the story.

Round and Round we go

With a better understanding of the emergence of narrative, I had a better understanding of my own creative process. With a better understanding of my own creative process, I had a better understanding of myself. Understanding my own creative process was also way of understanding how human beings relate to the universe: “We learn by assimilating experiences and grouping them into ordered schemata, into stable patterns of unity in variety. They enable us to cope with events and situation by applying the rules of the game appropriate to them” (Koestler 44).

We seem to use these patterns to explain nearly everything. When it is used as a formal guide to devising an aesthetic product, this process is called art. When the process is used to explain something already existing, it is called science. In many ways I have found this paper to be a thin line between art and science. Here is a related musing from my journal:

Journal #2

Jan 28, 2004

This is not a creative exercise only. It is what human beings simply do. They link “random” elements in the world and explain their meaning. This is the definition of creativity itself. Either everything in the world is already inherently connected, or humans like to make a lot of stuff up. What is science, but our best explanation of the way the world works? What is art but the beauty of the way the world works? What is science but the method? What is art but the beauty of the method? What is art but the performance? What is science but the breakdown of the performance? “He’s got that dance routine down to a science,” someone says. “He’s more than a chemist, he’s an artist,” says another.

Delving into the world of research has diminished the line between arts and sciences for me. After all, I had to believe no boundary existed between the two. Otherwise, I was either a phony TV producer or a phony researcher. Reading Koestler helped me understand this diminishing boundary:

The fluidity of the boundaries between Science and Art is evident, whether we consider Architecture, Cooking, Psychotherapy, or the writing of History. The mathematician talks of 'elegant' solutions, the surgeon of 'beautiful' operation, the literary critic of 'two-dimensional' characters. Science is said to aim at Truth, Arts at Beauty but the criteria of Tury (Such as veritability and refutability) are not as clean and hard as we tend to believe, and the criteria of Beauty are, of course, even less so. (Koestler 28)

The gist of society's perceived difference between art and science seems to be the difference between the processes of invention and discovery. Creative people are believed to have invented patterns, where scientists seem to have discovered theirs. But who is to say that if a scientist is the first to discover a pattern that lies within the laws of the universe that he did not invent something? Who is to say that an artist did not invented a new way to paint something but discovered it? Upon reading Koestler and Chapman, I felt further inspired to elaborate on this question:

Journal #6

Feb 18, 2004

I suppose the most exciting thing that I found in my research, today, was theory in Chapman and Koestler's books investigating the narrow and perhaps invisible line between the processes of invention and discovery. Often when I am writing something, or creating anything, I feel as though I am unearthing some preexisting thing rather than inventing a new one. I have already

mentioned the notion that the scripts I write have already been written and my job is to excavate it. I remember a tour guide in the Vatican telling me that Michelangelo did not believe he was sculpting figures but rather releasing them from the marble.

Another thing that I read in Koestler today was that the creative process and the humor making process were essentially the same thing. This certainly helps me out. Koestler defines the discovery of humor as the “fusion of unlike situations.” Maybe nearly anything can be fused together to make art, or even to make comedy, but what about narrative? When ideas are joined together like pearls on a string can we present them as a story? Must we make up explanations to answer the questions between them?

To the writer, the recognition of narrative arc in one’s own work often occurs in retrospect. Narrative is the pattern that we recognize in the work, after we have seen it in its entirety. It is only after he/she has seen the film that the viewer understands the full scope of the story. Perhaps this is why I did not understand the emergence of narrative in my work until long after it was finished. Writing this paper was a way for me to recognize the patterns both in the text itself and in the processes used to create them:

For those who argue that the process is the creativity, the patterns or combinations are seen merely as ephemeral way-stations in the process or by products of it. They characterize creativity as the pursuit of an objective that must always elude complete realization. The reach is more important than the grasp. We may quote Picasso who, as he finished one painting, discovered how he would do the next one better. It can be pointed out that the first law of thermodynamics leads to the second law, which anticipates Einstein, whose ideas blend with those of Planck, etc. (Chapman 247)

Is form necessary for understanding the world? It certainly helps us think we understand the world better, but are we just overly simplifying the unexplainable? Narrative, in so many ways, reinforces a myth of chronology. Things happen in order, on a small scale, but when viewed in the larger scope of things, timelines are a small cross-section of never ending cycles, right? Perhaps this is why Picasso or *Python* preferred to just show it all at once, or out of order:

But the 20th century wasn't about order; it was about fragmentation, dislocation, anomie, a sense not that man was progressing but that he was lurching aimlessly. Plot no longer sufficed. Just as visual artists invented Cubism to deconstruct reality and express the discontinuities of modern life in a painting and sculpture; literary artists needed now devices to convey a new reality in poetry and prose. (Gabler 21)

Perhaps these artists sought to destroy form, or at least deconstruct it, for the sake of exposing its irrelevance. Facts, gems of truths, exist all around us whether we choose to arrange them neatly or not. This paper is an example of the myth of chronology. Despite my best intentions to move chronologically, we have in many ways moved in circles. Concepts have been revisited over and over. Steps skipped, then revisited, dismissed, and then re-embraced. We began in something of intellectual disarray and we now return to it. This is the cyclical nature of order and chaos, I suppose. The cycle is the reason why we started with format, had *Python* rip it apart, and *SSMF* try to piece it back together. I suppose the next step would be to put this paper through a shredder and turn it in a garbage bag.

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