

2.8 Telling stories and sharing models

We use storytelling in many areas of life and sometimes without even realizing it. For example, when you present a plan or a budget, you often use storytelling to justify your choices by explaining how you imagine the future might evolve. Politicians also use storytelling to explain how they plan to bring about change for their constituents or why a certain law should be passed.

Models of systemic structures, such as connection circles and causal loop diagrams all tell a story. One way of sharing our understanding of a complex situation is by telling its story. One easy way of doing this is with online software. We will be using a free, online browser based program called Insight Maker. The advantage of this software is that there is nothing to install and it comes with a built-in storytelling feature and other publishing and sharing functions.

First you need to create an account at insightmaker.com. Once you login, click on “create new insight” in the top right hand corner and then “click me to clear this demo model” to show a blank worksheet. You are now ready to create your first model.

We will build the model following the same steps as when we drew it.

To add a variable to the model, click on the “Add Primitive” menu and select “Add Variable”. Double-click on the text “New variable” and change the name to “New subscribers”. Create a second variable and call it “Revenues”.

To create a link between the variables “New subscribers” and “Revenues”, you need to first activate the links function by clicking on the “Links” button in the menu bar. Click on the arrow icon in the middle of the “New subscribers” variable and drag it down to “Revenues” until the arrow becomes green. This means that the two variables are now connected. We can round the links by selecting them, holding down the shift button and clicking on the middle of the link. A new circle appears that you can then pull on to bend the arrow.

Add a new variable called “Marketing actions” and then close the loop by linking “marketing actions” to “New subscribers”. You have just finished your first reinforcing loop.

To add polarities to the relationships, show the contextual menu with a right-click on a blank part of the screen. Select “Create text” and then type a “+” in the text box. Right-click on the text box to change the font to 18 and remove underlining. We resize the text box and place it next to the head of the arrow between “New subscribers” and “Revenues”. We can then copy and paste this text box for all of the other polarities.

Now we can label our loop to show that it is a reinforcing feedback loop by inserting an image. Right-click on the center of the loop and select “Create picture”. Right-click on the picture, select “primitive picture”, then “built-in images” and choose the blue clock wise plus sign. Now add the other variables, links, polarities and images to your canvas.

We can now use the “storytelling” function of insight maker to tell the story behind this systemic diagram.

To use the storytelling feature, select “Storytelling” from the “Share” pull-down menu. This should launch the “Story Designer”. A story is made up of steps. At each step we will show a part of your model and accompany it with some accompanying text.

We will be using the “Story Designer” to add each step of our story. The “Automatically start story” pull-down menu allows you to choose who gets to see the story. Choose “Never” or “For editors” if you don’t want others to see the story until its finished. Here we have left the default value “For Non Editors”.

Let’s add a first step in the story to hide the model. Check the “enabled” box. Click on “Add Step” and select “Change Visibility”. We will make the entire model invisible to begin with and then show parts of it as the story progresses. Select all of the objects in the model and click on the “Select from Diagram” button.

There are several ways to select objects: with the “Story Designer” window open, click on the canvas and then trace a square around all of the objects with the mouse or, click on each object individually while holding the Ctrl key down. Click “Add from diagram” then set the opacity slider to 0 hide the objects.

We now add the second step in the story to begin narrating the story with text. Add a “Show Message” step that says “Netflix is an Internet television company that is today present in 190 countries and makes money by selling subscriptions to streamed proprietary and third party content. This model tells the story of the recent fall in new subscribers.”

Click the “Apply” button and note that there is a “View Story” button that now appears on the bottom left of the screen. Clicking on “View Story” launches Insight Maker’s storytelling function and introduces Netflix’s story that begins with a blank screen and, when you click on the “Step Forward” button it then shows the text that you just entered.

To show the blank screen and the text at the same time, we need to group the steps together. Select the “Group Steps” action from the “Add step” menu and name the group “Introduction”. Drag the two steps into the new “Start” folder. Now when you run the story, both steps will show at the same time. The name of the group makes no difference to the way Insight maker works. It simply helps you keep track of your story and keep it in order.

We will now begin unveiling the systemic structure behind Netflix’s situation. We will start with the central reinforcing loop of growth and add some text to explain that Netflix recruits new subscribers through strong marketing actions.

To show the lower part of the model, select the objects (3 variables, 3 polarities, 3 links and 1 image) that you want to make reappear and add another “Change Visibility” step. This time, the opacity should be set to 100, the default value to show the objects.

Add the text “Netflix recruits new subscribers through strong marketing actions” and then group the steps together in a new group called “Growth”.

You can finish the model using the steps described in the additional materials below.

Once you have finished writing the systemic story, you can begin telling it by clicking on the “View story” button at the bottom of the screen.

It’s now time to share your story. Click on the “Save” button in the top icon bar, name your model, provide a short description and make sure you allow “public access” to your model. You can now use the sharing tools in the “Share” menu to post it on Facebook or embed it into a blog or you simply share the link by e-mail.