

Story-Telling and Narrative: Alternative Genres Linking IS Publication and Practice

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Abstract. Genres of communications significantly influence the evolution of a field of research. In the Information Systems (IS) domain, a debate has recently emerged on the chance to implement alternative genres in the representation of IS publication and practice. We hence propose to apply story-telling and narrative as alternative genres to write publications reporting IS research. By presenting a narration exemplifying the implementation of these genres, we argue that the incremental introduction of their principles would be beneficial to IS research, enabling a revisited representation of IS themes that extends the boundaries of canonical genres. In parallel, thanks to the peculiarity of the story narrated, we claim that story-telling and narrative are also powerful instruments supporting IS practice. The mediating role of action research in enhancing the link between story-telling and narrative used as writing genres and practices will also be recognized.

Keywords: Alternative genre · Story-Telling · Narrative · Action research · Information systems publication · Information systems practice

1 Introduction

“The universe is made of stories, not atoms.”

Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980)

The evolution of a field of research like that on Information Systems (IS) inherently relates not only to the content of investigation – in either its theoretical or empirical forms – and to the methodologies applied to conduct the research endeavor; it is also significantly shaped by the writing genre traditionally applied as a vehicle to report its content and findings.

In the last years, an intriguing debate has emerged among Editors and Authors of Academic Journals – commonly recognized as the most suitable outlet for scientific publications – with regards to the genres to be applied when writing academic publications [1, 2]. As the concept of genre represents a meaningful pattern of communication which consists of a sequence of speech acts [3], IS scholars and practitioners are currently discussing the opportunity to apply alternative genres in IS research representation. According to [4], the term “alternative genres” refers to unconventional forms of

thinking, doing, and communicating scholarship and practice. In particular, it is related to innovation with respect to epistemological perspectives, research methods, semantic framing, literary styles, and media of expression. Furthermore, [2] defines “alternative genres” as a new and larger class of publication genres, which would encompass the narratives and presentational innovations such as theatre, video and other types of presentational genres.

Providing an opportunity to better understand specific issues in an innovative way, alternative genres add value to the existing set of publication genres in IS research, and as such should be of interest for the IS community [2]. Alternative genres should not only be considered as a source of new types of research output, but also as an addition and enrichment of dominant publication genres; put differently, a combination of traditional and alternative techniques can provide deeper and more profound understanding of the analysed phenomena.

By reflecting new forms of analysis that serve as a source of inspiration, innovation and insight generation, alternative genres as such could potentially change the current perception of the world [5]. The creation of alternative genres category could act as a driver for getting creative ideas within the business ecosystem. On the contrary, an establishment of a new formal category carries the risk of disaccreditation of the published papers within the category, and hence should be tackled according to the accreditation procedures [2]. By motivating scientists and researchers to propose more reflexive works, such as literature reviews, narratives and essays, top journals could set the platform for the publications of more enigmatic papers as well as practice-oriented papers, resulting in larger inclusion of alternative genres [1].

Ultimately, the aim of the emerging debate on genres is to sustain the quest for alternative, fresh standpoints that “challenge or reframe our taken-for-granted assumptions, perceptions and practices related to representing IS research” [6].

With the intention to contribute to this on-going debate, our study puts forward the proposal to apply story-telling and narrative as an alternative genre to write publications reporting IS research. Well-grounded in an interpretative philosophical assumption, story-telling and narrative could support the understanding of IS phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them. More precisely, we aim at exploring and exploiting the interpretive power of these alternative genres, “aimed at producing an understanding of the context of the information system, and the process whereby the information system influences and is influenced by the context” [7].

In addition to the role of story-telling and narrative in IS publication, we will argue that this genre is also valuable to link IS publication and practice. The mediating role of action research in enhancing the link between story-telling and narrative used as both writing genres and practice will also be recognized.

The remainder of this Section will present the salient points of the alternative genre proposed.

1.1 Story-Telling and Narrative as Alternative Genres – Definition, Structure and Principles

Considering the significance and pervasiveness of the topic, several definitions for story-telling and narrative have been provided. The Oxford English Dictionary defines

a narrative (or story) as “any account of connected events, presented to a reader or listener in a sequence of written or spoken words, or in a sequence of (moving) pictures”. According to [8], narrative is the main conventional form of organising human experiences and memories through stories; stories hence inherently have an anecdotal base based on anthropological observation [9]. Consistently with this paramount role assigned to narrative, [10] claims that “a narrative is a communicative relation which is often conflated with straightforward understanding of what a story is. Narrative is a particular form of representation implementing signs and how it is necessarily bound up with sequence, space and time”.

Indeed, narratives are not only chronologies or reports of evidence: stories represent poetic elaborations of narrative material, aiming to communicate facts as experience, not facts as information [11].

Focusing on story-telling as a publication genre, [2] defines it as a way to organize a discourse and the resulting narrative. Each story has two meanings: (i) the story itself, i.e. the set of events that we want to report; and (ii) the narrative, i.e. what is being told.

Like all genres, story-telling and narrative should conform to a canonical structure and a set of principles.

As proposed in different studies on narrative structure (e.g., see [8, 9]; Tolstoy, 1899; [12]), the traditional way to organize stories is the “three-act form”, where: the first act is used to provide context and introduce the complication – or the “inciting incident” [13]; the second act further develops the complication, builds up the tension and creates a narrative climax; and the third act presents the resolution, drawing the narration’s conclusions as well as the “moral of the story” [12], and possibly leaving one or more issues pending for further reflection [8]. Such structure is almost canonical in narrative, and evidences of it are found from ancient representations in Greek theatre to contemporary cinema [14].

[9] Argues that stories have recurring structures, made of one or more cycles of interaction between the protagonist and her or his external and internal context. Narrative is hence built on the following main structural components:

- Context;
- Complication;
- Protagonist (P);
- Cycle/s of P’s internal (thoughts and feelings) and external (words and actions) responses, and consequences of P’s external responses;
- End of the story, with/without a complete solution.

Beyond their traditional structure, studies have investigated the principles and features of story-telling and narrative. [15] Identify four key elements of the narrative method: (i) experience; (ii) time; (iii) personal knowledge; and (iv) reflection and deliberation. All four elements are interconnected and of vital importance for story-telling. Experience and time are present all around us, and as such influence human behaviour. Considering that without time, no experience can be gained, it can be easily concluded that time is a critical dimension of experience. Through the process of learning, knowledge is obtained, and as such determines a person’s image of the world and of her/himself. Reflection puts the emphasis on the past events in a sense of revision and reproduction, whereas deliberation conveys a sense of preparation for the

future. It is clear enough that reflection commonly implies a preparation for the future and that deliberation implies past considerations; hence, narrative requires a balanced treatment of past, present and future. Overall, a storyteller is influenced by his or her personal experience and knowledge, as well as senses of reflection and deliberation, at all points of life; consequently, so are the storyteller's stories.

According to [8], story-telling and narrative are fundamental tools not only for reality representation, but also for "reality construction". The ten features of narratives he sketches constitute a reference framework when shaping or analysing a narrated story, which consists of: (i) narrative diachronicity – a narrative is a unique pattern of events over time, and as such, it is irreducibly durative; (ii) particularity – narrative takes as its reference particular happenings, which however, are their vehicle rather than destination; a story's suggestiveness lies in the emblematic nature of its particulars, which may embody specific meanings; (iii) intentional state entailment – narrative is about characters acting in a setting, and the story's happenings shall be relevant to their intentional states while engaged in the story itself; however, intentional state does not necessarily determine the course of events, as characters' action may depart from their intentions, and narrative can provide the basis for interpreting the reasons (not the causes) behind the characters' actions; (iv) hermeneutic composability – an act of hermeneutic interpretation of the meaning of what is expressed is implied in narration, where neither a rationalist truth nor an empirical demonstrability of the meaning apply; this applies to all parts of the story's whole, which need to be interpretatively composed and constituted by the narrator in the light of the overall narrative; (v) canonicity and breach – narrative shall concern how "an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated, or deviated from" [8] in a manner to tear apart the canonical script's legitimacy; "the breach component in a narrative can be created by linguistic means as well as by the use of a putatively delegitimizing precipitating event in the plot" [8]; (vi) referentiability – a narrative refers to reality, even though it could depart from it and embrace a fictional account of events; (vii) genericness – narrative, as all other genres, is both a "conventional way of representing human plights and a way of telling that predisposes our minds and sensitivities in particular ways [...]. While [genres] may be representation of social ontology, they are also invitations to a particular style of epistemology. As such, they may have quite as powerful an influence in shaping our modes of thought as they have in creating the realities that their plots depict" [8]; (viii) normativeness – as narrative ultimately rests on the breach of conventional expectations, where a breach presupposes a norm, narrative is constitutionally normative; this does not, however, imply a normative approach according to which each trouble in the story should be ultimately resolved; (ix) context sensitivity and negotiability – the context of narrative is assimilated according to the reader's background, though the reader inevitably takes the narrator's intentions into account when approaching his or her story, thus making narrative a viable instrument for cultural negotiation; (x) narrative accrual – narratives can (and should) accrue to create a story of some sort, which may eventually take the form of culture, history, tradition or field-specific knowledge.

Further recommendations and elements of story-telling refer to the need to see the story as a whole [16], which implies that some degree of central control is necessary to ensure that the story makes sense as a unit: to attain this notion successfully, a central entity or narrator should perform a unifying and orchestrating activity [17]. [18] Add

that a good narrative involves a balance between what Aristotle referred to as *logos* – i.e. internal consistency of the message, *ethos* – i.e. credibility of the writer, and *pathos* – i.e. emotional appeal. [18] Also highlight that narrative is often used in the context of action research, proposing five principles for assessing the quality of narrative research reports: (i) historical continuity; (ii) reflexivity – the ability to stimulate reflection; (iii) dialectics – the dialectical elaboration of the story; (iv) workability – the production of usable practices; and (v) evocativeness – the emphasis on *ethos* and *pathos*.

Eventually, story-telling or anecdote enhancement should also follow the principles of privacy and confidentiality for material gathered, and that of non-judgement – since the purpose of observation is to capture things as they are, not as the narrator would like them to be [9].

After discussing the definitions, structure, principle and feature of the genre, the next section will present an exemplification of story-telling and narrative as an alternative genre to write a publication investigating the IS theme of Enterprise Resource Planning implementation in a small-medium enterprise. The story narrated employs the aforementioned principles and reports a research conducted by the authors in the timeframe December 2011–April 2013.

2 Alternative Genre Application – A “Story” on the Use of Stories and Narrative in the Implementation of an ERP System

“Are we sure this is the only way?”

The Chief Executive Officer looked around the roundtable where his team of executives was sitting together with the marketing and technology representatives of the partnering IT vendor and our team of academic researchers. The faces and expressions he saw did not convince him. Without waiting for a reply, he said: *“I need you to consider and explain to me all the implications related to this project. Enlighten me”*.

We were expecting this question: our role was that of researchers and advisors of the company’s management team and possible facilitators of the change to be introduced. We had been working side-by-side with CEO for three months, and we knew that, in his mind, a proper assessment of multifaceted implications made all the difference. The reason for his stance had deep roots in the story of his organization.

Since the early fifties, his company had come a long way. Started as a family business manufacturing glass products, it soon became a national designer and manufacturer of display cases; when it was commissioned a set of installations for an art museum, the company’s founders and managers envisioned a clear opportunity for future growth. In the period 1970–2000, the company nurtured both technical and cultural skills in the fields of artistic installation, museum exhibitions and works conservation; such competences allowed it to become a global exhibition designer involved in several projects with renown institutions, such as the British Museum, the Tower of London Museum, the Louvre in Paris, the Museum of Modern Arts and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. In 2012, the company owned an international portfolio of projects and had gained worldwide recognition.

As the company grew globally, however, it was shaped by two diverging thrust: on the one hand, the CEO aimed at maintaining the company's inheritance of small-medium enterprise and its craftsman approach towards each activity and work; on the other, a compelling need for organic development and structuration was perceived by the management. As a result, the organizational evolution was to some extent convoluted and not fully consistent: while some functions (e.g. design and manufacturing) operated with a high degree of structuration and technology support, others (e.g. administration, procurement, project management and marketing) were almost completely unstructured. Furthermore, Information Technology did not evolve alongside the company's manufacturing technologies. The little IT function was largely focusing on maintaining the computers used for running Computer Aided Design and Computer Aided Manufacturing software; data analysis and storing was either based on mere spreadsheets, or more frequently, on paperwork.

In early 2012, when this story takes places, it was time to make a strategic decision about IT. The management team had been consulting a shortlist of IT vendors for three months, and the most promising solution proposed was that of implementing an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system to centralize and support information management and workflow throughout the functions. The Marketing Manager from the vendor was selling the idea that an ERP would have solved all problems the company was facing. *"It will be a 'panacea of all evils'"*, he used to tell everyone he met.

However, the CEO had profound doubts about this change, and his worries were somewhat justifiable. The CEO had been in charge of leading the company for more than thirty years, inheriting it from his father, and he was well aware of its organizational inconsistencies: he foresaw the introduction of such a pervasive system would determine radical modifications in several areas, with unpredictable results. He had always played a key role in human resource management, including selection and recruiting, so he expected some of his employees to eventually resist to or impair the IT project. On top of this, he held a Philosophy and Literature background, which gave him an anti-conformist and original perspective on many strategic or organizational issues, including technology: he had contrasting feelings concerning IT, which he liked to philosophically define as *"a robot with huge potential to enhance human's capabilities, but after all, a robot with no will and no creative value in itself other than that of the human utilizing it"*.

The meeting with the management, the IT vendors and the academic researchers was meant to make a final decision concerning ERP implementation in the company. However, considering the CEO's eclectic character, a twist was just around the corner.

The vendor's Marketing Manager started addressing the hot question on impacts: *"We are aware an ERP has multidimensional impacts, but don't worry, we have done this before: our solutions are modular, flexible, scalable, interoperable and secure. They support a wide range of activities and processes, and we will take care of the integration with you legacy systems"*.

"Our legacy systems...". The CEO made a long reflective pause. *"What about our cultural legacy? And our human resources legacy? How do you take those into account?"*.

The Marketing Manager seemed puzzled: the one spoken by the CEO was clearly a language he was not familiar with. He almost mumbled when formulating an answer:

“Well... we essentially perform process mapping and requirements identification through standard models, like UML...”

“And what in the world is UML?” the CEO interrupted. *“Please, I am quite an old man, would you mind sparing me this purely technical language? Whenever that language is used, it seems to me it is used on purpose, and the purpose is quite often to make things more obscure than they actually are. I am firmly convinced IT language is an unnecessary mystification created to put off rather than involve”*. After this openly provoking statement, the Marketing Manager remained silent for a while, as all the other participants to the meeting did. The CEO had deliberately created a breach in an otherwise ordinary client-supplier meeting; it was then time for him to make his point.

“Let me tell you what we will do this time. I want no technical language, no ‘UML’: I want you to tell me a story. The story of why and how my company would benefit from IS. And when I say you, I mean all of you, all of us: not only our partners, even each and every manager and employee in my company will need to narrate how this information system would affect the way she or he works and live. You are my partners, colleagues and friends, I want to read your stories, hear your voice, in a language we can all understand. That’s what we will do”.

The request sounded as bizarre as it was resolute. Some of the company’s own managers tried to question it, but the CEO was inflexible. The meeting was closed with the action point to start gathering story-telling and narrations from all people possibly influenced by ERP implementation.

In a private discussion following the meeting with the IT vendors, the CEO revealed his motives to us: *“My father used to tell me you should never reckon without your host. My hosts are my employees: if I want to change something so radical in my organization, I need my decision to be shared. Or I’ll be paying the consequences when nobody uses the newly implemented systems, or worse, they feel threatened by it and lose their motivation and creativity. And frankly... I also see this as a great opportunity to pursue some sort of a ‘literature crusade’ to acculturate my Human Resources at all levels. They will benefit from it, you’ll see”*. The grin on his face clearly showed he wanted to go all the way.

If the beginning of the story was unconventional, what that followed was even more unexpected.

An inter-firm client-supplier team was constituted, with the aim to collect, interpret, relate and synthesise the narrations from all parties involved, in all their forms. In such an endeavour, significant support came from the Project Manager appointed by the CEO: funnily enough, he was an Architect with little or no knowledge of IS. We soon realized his alienated perspective would have caused some problems in the first phases of the project: when we asked about his new appointment two weeks after he got it, he burst out *“I hated this assignment in the first place [...]. Now I’m starting to understand its relevance, but I’m still not sure if I’m the right person for the job...”*,

Eventually, we had to admit he actually provided a fresh look at the issue of interest. When discussing with the academic researchers in the middle of the project, his peculiar view of what IS should be and how they should be described emerged. And it was revealing.

He told us: *“My job as an Architect is to design an environment where people live and which people enjoy, not just a tool. As time went by I started seeing IS as the*

environment I had to design. Indeed, IS is way more than a tool: it is a pervasive way of doing things which changes people's work, and in turn, life. As such, its implementation should be investigated in terms of employees' feelings about it, not only through convoluted programming languages and weird modelling schemes. And the investigation of human's ideas and feeling is surely best achieved through storytelling".

As a whole, the effect of the CEO's decision to involve both white and blue collars in the narration of their perspective on the IT revolution underway exceeded the brightest expectations. As the word spread, almost each employee felt compelled to tell her or his story about the workplace and how IT could affect it, from her or his peculiar perspective.

As the process of stories gathering was completed, the Project Manager met with the academic researchers to start drawing some conclusions.

"Take a look at what I have here" he said, quite satisfied with the results of his team's work. Out of sixty-two employees, they collected more than ninety narrations – including one from the IT vendor – in different forms: short stories, essays, mottos, and even rhymes.

A manager structured his story as an historical essay on the role of technology in human history, concluding with positive remarks on its adoption by the company:

"Throughout the history of mankind, technology innovations have marked fundamental milestones enabling our evolution. [...]".

Enthusiastic narrations of how IT could positively influence working practices were delivered: and sometimes, they showed biased or inaccurate expectations that required realignment. An example of this came from a Project Manager involved in international projects. What she wrote seemed to relate more to a Decision Support Systems than to an ERP:

"Finally, IT! I was waiting for you! Now I'll be able to get the right information at the right time, analyse them, extract the charts I need and keep full control of my projects' time, cost and quality".

Some ironic statements were also there. The Project Manager was giggling as he handed two sheets to us:

"If we adopt an Information System, maybe Mary [family name omitted] will refrain from losing or mistyping all the notes I hand her. Adam".

Attached to this statement with a paper clip, a witty reply followed:

*"To my dearest Adam [family name omitted],
My ability to mistyping your handwritten notes is inversely proportional to your ability to write sense-making notes.
With deliberate irony,
Mary"*

On the other hand, not everyone was fully content with the innovation. Several stories or narration showed a critical stance towards the new system. A short story came from an employee in the administration:

“Average Joe works in the archival department, spending most of his time reading, storing, retrieving and relating paper documents. He is quite happy with it. Then, IT comes into play, promising to help Joe in doing his job, while saving, let’s say, 50% of his time. Joe is even happier in the first place, but then he starts thinking ‘what will I do with the remaining half of my time? Will I be relocated? Or worse, will my managers start to believe they do not really need me?’. Eventually, Average Joe feels IT is basically stealing his job. And then, he is happy no more.”

Another personal, first-person narration was delivered by an account manager in procurement, and showed some resentment towards the new company’s orientation:

“My job in the supplier selection department is extremely delicate. I am working with people, managing contracts. I have been carrying out my tasks in the best way possible, always. Then that smart guy from the IT vendor comes in, and tells me what I have been doing for years is now obsolete. Now, I am quite an easy-going lady, so I’m trying to grin and bear it. However, I easily foresee that when the new IT stuff is introduced, I will be feeling lost. I won’t know where to start from, I will lose motivation and my performance will plummet. How can technology replace human interaction and rationality after all?”

The Project Manager read these two contributions and thoughtfully said *“We are going to need to work on this. We’ll have to restate the urging need for innovation, but we must communicate a feeling of security and stability to everyone”*.

It was then the turn for the IT vendor narration. *“They made me sweat in the early phases. Their answer to all our requests was ‘No way. We don’t work like that’”,* said the Project Management. *“Eventually, they made an effort to understand our unstructured requirements formulated through story-telling; they even came up with their own story”*. Indeed, the supplier delivered a fascinating – though not fully original – statement envisioning and projecting all benefits of IT:

“We have a dream. We are dreaming of a world where information flow freely. We are dreaming of a company where there’s no boundary between people and units. We are dreaming of a place where technology unites, and helps people communicating and sharing their experiences [...]. We have this dream. Do you wish to share this dream with us?”

“Martin Luther King would have liked this...” said the Project Manager, and we all laughed at the joke. Amusingly enough, a modification of these very words soon became part of the IT vendor’s institutional mission.

When we asked about internal resistance to this alternative project, he commented: *“Few people actually complained, and if they did, they had to do it with an essay or a motto: I recall this one from one manager...”* and he searched the narrations pile, taking out a small card with this quotation written on:

“What I think of this idea of using story-telling? Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn”.

Again, he mildly smiled. *“They were then confronted with other manuscripts showing different perspectives, rather than compelled to follow an order. This should hopefully increase their empathy towards their fellow colleagues, their bosses and the new system”*.

All in all, everyone participated in the process, and to various extent, became part of it.

The CEO considered this a first, significant success which would have enabled his company to move forward. Indeed, it was this strong participation to the ‘story-telling project’ who made him decide to give the implementation process his ‘green light’.

At the kick-off meeting, he held a plenary talk with all employees. All eyes were on him as he stepped on stage, and once again, he approached the audience with a story, in the form of a metaphorical narration.

“When we are babies... – well, I guess we do not recall much of that period, I am now assuming what our parents told us is truthful – our mother is the world. Our eyes are made to look at her and our arms to hang on her. As we grow up, we find out there is much more to discover out there, much more to see; reality literally expands its boundaries in front of us. Reality is there for us to experience, but also there to be crafted and created. And not only reality changes: we change as well. Hence, we constantly change in an ever-changing world: this is, let’s admit it, the most frightening of things. Very few of us like to change: it is at least annoying, maybe even frustrating. However, if we reflect on it, it is also the greatest gift of all. As we change, as we grow, we gradually become familiar with new instrument to experience and even shape our world: legs to walk around; hands to write or make gestures; a mouth to speak, and sometimes misspeak; and above all, a mind to learn, to understand, to compare, to induce and deduce. A mind to create.

Today, as individuals, as an organisation, as a family, we choose to change again. We choose to depart from our previous ‘weltanschauung’ and to extend our boundaries even further; we choose to learn how to use a new tool, which will influence the way we work as well as the way we live.

But, my friends, be not afraid. Perceive technology as an extension of your hands, you mouths, your minds: perceive it as your next step of evolution and growth. It won’t change who you are: it will only provide a further means of expressing yourselves. It won’t be good or bad in itself: it will reflect how prone you are to learn and experiment. It won’t make you a better worker or a better person: but I am convinced the way you approach this process may influence your attitude towards the next big changes in your life.

So, take it from me: be open to change, be eager to experiment and learn, and fundamentally, be ready to live.”

When he left the stage after his speech, he finally knew.

He knew he had convinced them, and he knew he had convinced himself.

He was right: the ERP implementation would have required approximately eleven months, fairly below the average of eighteen and a half months reported by analysts in the Panorama Consulting Group’s ERP Report he took as a reference. In the first months following implementations, promising efficiency gains would have been reported, with peaks in those functions – administration, procurement and marketing & sales –and processes – budgeting, call for tender proposals formulation, vendor rating, project procurement, requirement planning and resource allocation – where IT was largely unused and data were scattered around many units and owners.

“So far, we already cut the lead time to formulate a business proposal for the call for tenders we want to compete in from two weeks to six days” a manager in charge of budgeting would have commented. “We are also beginning sorting out some of the issues about planning requirements and having the right resources just when we need them. The system’s introduction is not mature yet, so we are just scratching the surface: this means that, hopefully, there’s a lot more to come”.

And above all, in line with what the CEO cared about the most, the overall project would have reinforced organizational culture and shared values; it would have created a

sense of unity and common direction; it would have improved organizational climate and control tensions; it would also have strengthened the ties with the IT supplier. This all, thanks to the unconventional approach taken from the very beginning.

The Marketing Manager from the IT vendor would have reinforced this opinion in one of his last comments: *“We really had a hard time finding the motivation to undertake the ‘story-telling’ pilot project, but now we recognize its value. Users got growingly involved in the system as they tried to investigate its influence on their everyday activities; eventually, they became interested about how the system worked, and often, they were positively impressed. Users were part of the project since its early phases, and to my understanding gained through my professional experience, this is key for successful implementation”*.

As he was leaving the auditorium, the CEO walked through the whole team who originally met around a table to shape the company’s IT future – the team he originally provoked and shocked with his proposals – shaking hands with everyone. *“It will be a good project”* he whispered to his staff. Then the door closed behind him.

3 Reflection

The implementation of story-telling and narrative as an alternative genre in IS publication brings about several intriguing implications: our main argument in this study is that such implications cross the boundaries of IS publication, to affect IS practice as well. Indeed, our exemplary application in Sect. 2 presents a meta-role for story-telling, both content and vehicle of the narration: we hence propose that story-telling could frame both IS publication and practice, thus constituting a link between these two halves of the same whole. Elaborating on the findings from [4, 18], we also argue that story-telling shows significant synergies with action research methodology applied to IS, and the two could be mutually reinforcing.

3.1 Story-Telling and Narrative in IS Publication

The story we narrated, written according to the main principle presented in Sect. 1.1, shows the potential – and possible drawbacks – of story-telling and narrative when used as writing genres in IS publication. The story fundamentally follows the traditional three-act form, the “inciting incident” [13] being the CEO’s unconventional stance and bizarre request on the use of story-telling.

It also conforms to [9] structure, which, however, is revisited in its flow. Our narration is structured as follows:

- Introduction of the Protagonist (CEO);
- Context and CEO internal characterization;
- Complication determined by CEO’s external response and contrast with the “Antagonist” (IT Vendor’s MM);
- First cycle/s of CEO’s internal (thoughts and feelings) and external (words and actions) responses, and consequences of CEO’s external responses (involving Managers, Employees, Suppliers and Action Researchers);

- Introduction of a Co-protagonist (PM);
- Second cycle/s of PM's internal (thoughts and feelings) and external (words and actions) responses, and consequences of PM's external responses (involving Managers, Employees, Suppliers and Action Researchers);
- End and "moral of the story".

Opening the narration with a direct intervention from the would-be protagonist is a narrative device to enhance the "*in medias res*" perception in the reader, capture attention and build up the tension; the introduction of an antagonist, a main co-protagonist and several characters with minor roles is essential to provide different angles, while narrative unity and holism is ensured by the main plot's structure; moreover, ending the story with its moral – provided by a surprisingly revealing speech by the protagonist – facilitates the interiorizing of its meaning and stimulates empathy in the reader. Story-telling hence serves as a learning enabler [15], where the context and the meaning are constantly negotiated between the writer and the reader to achieve a common ground [8].

This restructuring demonstrates a high potential of flexibility and adaptability of the genre to the context; it also sheds light on the power of story-telling to manage and convey meaning, personal motives and soft determinants (e.g. protagonists' internal responses; subplots and stories-in-the-story; figures of speech like metaphors, puns, irony, sarcasm) which would have largely been "lost in translation" in traditional scientific writings.

An essential role enabling this genre to fulfil its literary task is that of the narrator: it is recommendable that the narrator overlaps with the writer/researcher [17, 18], playing the part of the "quasi-omniscient narrator", so as to provide insightful or intriguing details on several characters' internal and external responses, while maintaining control of how the story and the narration develop; this may include anticipating or postponing elements, or adding additional perspectives, to attract the reader's attention while facilitating her or his understanding.

Considering [8] features of narrative, they should be taken into full account and partly reinterpreted to ensure narrative is valuably adopted as an alternative genre in IS research. We specifically refer to referentiability, whereas a narration should possess strong ties with the real events that occurred, so as to avoid fictitious extensions of the story – regardless of their fascinating power. Normativeness should also be revisited, as uncanny events should not only be made comprehensible, interpretable and thus bearable, they should also be resolved – at least in part – in the story narrated, to underscore the actual contribution of action research to the issue under scrutiny, and the study's contribution to literature and practice. At least, the story should imply which events or actions led to the failure to find a solution to the inciting incident and/or to emerging open issues, so as to provide a contribution in the form of anti-advice. After all, the story should be "workable" [18].

On the contrary, the principle of genericness is particularly revealing, as it discloses how alternative genres influence not only the way reality is depicted, but also our modes of thought. Innovations in genres, as supported in this study, should hence be celebrated not only as a change in the content of imagination, but also in its *modus operandi*. Intentional state entailment discloses a possible dualism between characters'

intentions and external responses, and calls for a narration which accounts for both and provides the basis for an hermeneutic composition and interpretation of the story's meaning.

Context sensitivity and negotiability is also key, as it shows how narrative creates a common ground for confrontation and synthesis of different perspectives: this is valuable for both IS writing – where a number of alternative standpoints may coexist and be negotiated within the whole story – and IS practice, where narrative could serve as an instrument for conflict resolution.

More broadly, the story's writer/research/narrator should look for a constructive cooperation with the IS community, thus aiming to ensure narrative accrual and the development of an incremental and possibly ever-growing contribution from stories published in IS journals. Narrative accrues once shared culturally, and IS academic journals would provide a legitimate, extremely suitable instrument for the creation of incremental knowledge on information systems based on story-telling and narrative: such extension in genres, sponsored in a growing number of IS works (e.g. [1–4]), would represent an enriching deviation which, however, maintains complicity with the canon of traditional scientific writing.

Such complicity could be preserved by proposing the argument that story-telling and narrative genres are an extension and revisiting of the writing approach currently used to report case studies and action research endeavours. Both these options are hence considered below.

Case studies are “empirical inquiries that investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” [19]. The aim of case research is understanding complex phenomena and thus building new theory – or extending existing theories – on them [20]. The application of story-telling and narrative principles and features would constitute a beneficial revisiting and extension of case writing traditionally found in many IS publications, with specific reference to studies addressing ERP implementation (e.g., see [21–25]). Following the claim that ERP implementations are complex undertakings [23] which need to be assessed in a multidimensional fashion, we argue that story-telling could support the investigation of otherwise left-aside organizational perspectives. Being ERP implementation a socio-technical challenge [25], studies addressing this issue – as well as the more general theme of IS introduction – should consider social dynamics and human-related motives [7], which, from a publication writing standpoint, are best described through the narration of a story; at the same time, story-telling as an IS practice could stimulate the inherently human feelings of empathy and identification with the narrated characters and events, thus driving change towards the intended outcomes.

Exploiting the genre's advantages, while controlling for its disadvantages, would constitute a normative breach that enables IS publications based on cases to overcome the limitations of canonical scientific writing (i.e. constraints on figures of speech, rhetorical devices and styles available; structural rigidity; limited accountability of internal responses and motives, and limited perception of the intentional state vs. external response dualism; limited empathy and involvement evoked in the reader), thus providing a truly multifaceted account of the “organizational drama” [26] behind IS adoption.

Action research, as a form of qualitative research [27], is described as a setting in which a client is involved in the process of data gathering, which is prevalingly under the charge of a researcher [28]. According to [29], “action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework”.

When reporting action research, style of communication matters. A recent study from [4] investigates how the need to report action research’s results in IS publications leads to the selection of different styles, revealing the importance of the notion of “style composition”. The results of their study also provide indication that styles adopted by IS action researchers vary according to the three different sections of the article – premise, inference and contribution – and have been changing in time.

Action research, as part of the broader qualitative research stream, could also benefit from a thoughtful design of interviews to generate and gather data that provide insight into people’s experiential life [30], reshaped through story-telling: different interviewing methods such as appreciative interviews, laddering interviews and photo-diary interviews can provide enriched descriptions beyond the realist genre when incorporated in a narrative or case study.

Elaborating on the findings presented in [18], we argue that narrative and story-telling could constitute a fundamental genre to report action research in IS publication. To support our argument, while enabling a smoother introduction of this alternative genre in the IS journals’ publication canon, we propose to extend the template designed in [4] – directed to IS action researchers to support their publication structuring – by explicitly including a “Narration” building block.

The revisited template would hence follow this structure: (i) Introduction; (ii) Background; (ii) Framing; (iv) Methods; (v) *Narration*; (vi) Results; and (vii) Discussion.

In Narration (v), the case or project experience of the action researcher is represented by means of story-telling and narrative. To ensure intra-template balance of the overall structure, the Narration phase could be introduced in Methods (iv), in term of its founding principles and features; its key messages, interpretation and “moral” could be synthesized in Results (vi) and be further explored in Discussion (vii).

This process of incremental inclusion would make story-telling more easily acceptable for mainstream IS journals – where a radical restructuring and revisiting of the traditional scientific writing may have a difficult uptake – thus serving as an “accreditation” procedure, consistently with the issue addressed in [2]; nevertheless, it would preserve the value of stories and add their contribution to the action researchers’ overall study, and it would facilitate narrative accrual [8].

When discussing the genre’s limitations, story-telling and narrative mostly rely on the reader’s interpretative ability, which could in turn be affected by cultural setting and personal characteristics [31]. In line with this, [32] noticed a sort of independence of the story and its interpretation: “a story, once told, no longer belongs solely to the storyteller”, and might have an uncontrolled evolution unrelated to the intended purpose the storyteller had in the first place. Narrative meanings may also be difficult to be coded in results; and IS researchers might show some rigidity and unwillingness to adopt story-telling, due to their scientific writing background, and to the fear of a

reduction in the purely informative power of their publications. Among those who adopt the alternative genre on the contrary, a risk to run into what we define the “novelist syndrome” could arise: the writer/researcher could wish to add fictitious or instrumental elements to the story to make it more appealing [9], though this would constitute a clear departure from a scientific approach, undermining the publication’s contribution.

A summary of the main advantages and disadvantages of story-telling and narrative as alternative genres in IS publication is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of story-telling and narrative as alternative genres in IS publication.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on communication, discussion and interpretation (not just reporting) of key findings, results and messages • Focus on building a consensus and a common culture of shared understanding • Role of “learning enabler” • Provision of a vehicle to messages and meanings related to sub-plots or characters’ internal responses, personal motives and soft determinants, which may risk to be “lost in translation” in a traditional report or writing style • Accountability of the “emotional state” vs. “external response” dualism • Passionate, non-aseptic discourse underscoring multiple angles • Stimulation of empathy and involvement in the reader • Provision of a hint at the “organizational drama” behind any IS implementation • Availability of figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, climax, twists and rhetorical styles such as irony and sarcasm • Context sensitivity and negotiation – coexistence and negotiation of different standpoints in the whole story; • Flexibility and adaptability to context • Holism and unity provided by the quasi-omniscient narrator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncontrolled evolution and unintended meanings • Possible independence between the story and its interpretation • Influence of cultural setting and personal characteristics on interpretation of the genre • Difficult coding of narrative results • Rigidity of IS researchers in adopting storytelling, due to scientific writing background • Possible reduction of the purely informative power of the narration • “Novelist syndrome”: possible low adherence to reality, due to the addition of fictitious or instrumental elements to the story (“fish tales” swapping experiences and escalating) to inflate its appeal

In the next paragraphs, we will further elaborate on these alternative genres’ contribution with reference to IS practice.

3.2 Story-Telling and Narrative in IS Practice

The story told reveals that narrative had a paramount practical role in enabling IS implementation within the company analysed.

The CEO perceived this alternative genre approach as necessary to reduce the negative outcomes of a transition from a largely manual to an automated information management. An alternative perspectives on IS, together with little or no knowledge of IT, gave the CEO and the Project Manager a fresh look at the implementation problem: the outcome was a rather innovative way to tackle it. The CEO's Philosophy and Literature background led him to force managers, employees and even IT vendor representatives to tell their experiences in a literary fashion: employees/users were requested to express their working expectations and feelings related to the new IS, and this made for better interiorizing of change and reduced long-term resistance.

Hence, he had IT modelling languages replaced by story-telling to describe the main features related to ERP implementation, including: requirements identification; IS expected benefits and drawbacks; and organizational impacts, for each employee and user role.

By doing so, the CEO performed an interesting paradigm shift in the classical approach to change management [21]: he created and inflated an initial "communication resistance" aimed to lessen the impact of any future "user resistance". As the story discloses, the process of approaching ERP implementation through writing created early inter and intra-organizational tensions, which, however, in the short term eased participation, involvement and commitment to use the newly introduced system: this determined more time spent in planning and processing unstructured information, but contemporarily, a shorter lead time in implementing the system, and above all, less waste of resources in transition management.

In his quest to revolutionize the traditional approach towards implementation supported by the IT vendor, he even renamed UML (Unified Modelling Language) with the Latin acronym "*Unicus Modus Linguae*" he coined, asserting that human's truly unique language of communication is story-telling rather than conceptual modelling.

These results, of interest for IS practice, were largely determined by the leader's extravagancy and eclecticism: even though formalizing extravagancy is far from being an easy task, another point we wish to make in this study is that an attempt should be made to include the alternative approach based on story-telling and narrative in IS practice, so as to overcome social resistance to technology-induced change, thus increasing the rates of acceptance and success for IS projects.

This is in line with the literature claiming that stories can be used for multiple purposes [32] and have various functions, examples being entertainment, creating trust and openness among colleagues, becoming aware of operating biases and values, and thinking outside the box to generate creative solutions and breakthroughs [33]. Since story-telling is the time-honoured practice of using fictional techniques to engage [34], stories and narratives are an important part of the solution for organizational problems: gradually, leaders are starting to make widespread use of stories for enlisting the commitment that enables change [35].

In [36] it is stated that stories, parables, chronicles, and narratives are powerful means for influencing mind-sets of involved parties. Literature mostly focuses on the effect of stories in building a consensus and a common culture of shared understanding. Stories should invite reader and listener to suspend judgments, understand the message of the story, and consequently decide which level of truthfulness it carries. Furthermore, [36] discusses the usage of tales, letters, poems, songs, and so forth by subordinated groups that existed in history (e.g. black slaves, Mexican Americans, Native Americans) to express their pain and everyday difficulties; those stories were claimed to be their survival and liberation tool. A parallel can be drawn between stories of these historical out-groups and contemporary employees: indeed, the creation of informal groups in the business environment is an inevitable incidence, and as such, those groups develop their own intragroup rules and dynamics and hence, are capable of opposing certain corporate decisions or initiatives – as it could have been the case in the company analysed in our study. Therefore, listening to stories helps acquiring ability to see the world through other eyes (e.g. executives and managers can understand concerns or resistance employees are experiencing due to a certain occurrence in the company – as it happened to the Project Manager after he read the short stories written by the employee in Administration and the account manager in Procurement).

As claimed in [37], knowledge in the organization is conveyed through mentoring and story-telling. Managers should be aware of and capable of understanding the cognitive processes behind these types of learning, because ignorance, lack of absorptive capacity, lack of pre-existing relationships, and lack of motivation can become barriers to transfer of knowledge and best practices within the organizations [34].

Discussing the importance of leadership in management of meaning through story-telling, [38] claim that the use of language, rituals, drama, stories, myths, and symbolic constructions can play an important role in the leader's efforts to establish a connection and experience to lead individuals orient themselves towards the achievement of shared goal. Through stories, leader can evoke patterns of meaning that can give them considerable control over a given situation. Therefore, by interpreting IS endeavours undertaken by organizations as phenomena based on the management of meaning performed through story-telling and narrative, sufficient emphasis would be placed on the development of alternative practices through which organized corporate actions can be initiated and continued.

As it occurs in the relationship between IS publication and story-telling as alternative writing genre, we believe action research could play a key mediating role in the proposal of story-telling as alternative IS practices. Indeed, a number of synergies between action research, story-telling and narrative exist at a practical level (see Table 2).

Action research is a type of activity designed to engage, and so are story-telling and narrative. It is constructed with people, it is research undertaken *with* others, and as such it implies a collaborative relationship, where the purpose of engagement is to obtain the different but yet complementary perspectives of collaborators for understanding the problem domain [11]: this is fully aligned with story-telling's and narrative's aim – both as a writing genre and as a practice – to depict multiple perspectives and involve peers in the solution-crafting process. Being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible are required capabilities for both action research and

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of story-telling and narrative as alternative genres in IS practice.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of an instrument used by the storyteller/leader to evoke patterns of meaning in order to exerting control • Stimulation of empathy in the target listener (manager, employee, customer, supplier, user) • Anticipation and enablement of change management • Enablement of a paradigm shift in change management, from “user resistance” to “communication resistance” • Provision of a “communicational path” towards organizational transformation, to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - guarantee holism - provide a multifaceted and original description of the issues - resolve conflicts - close the manager-employee gap - facilitate smoother transitions - lower diffusion and cultural barriers - facilitate organizational communication of and commitment to the project - foster engagement, active participation, motivation and involvement of human resources and stakeholders at all level - include all individuals, groups or out-groups - enhance participation in the design and customization process of IS - realign employees’ expectations on IS - possibly shorten project implementation length and reduce resources allotted to transformation management • Enhance the acculturation and open mindedness of employees (collateral benefit) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attribution of a positive value to the concepts of vagueness and uncertainty, hardly realizable in practical actions • Need for a capable storyteller/storyteller • Need for an attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible action researchers to act as facilitator and narrator • Resistance of the conservatives and traditionalists, reluctant to employ unusual languages • Waste of resources in coding the rules of the game, the new language and the process’ outcomes • Difficult transferability, translation and univocal interpretation of messages • Cultural risk of excluding clusters of key users, left behind or left aside because of the use of a communication tool they either do not like, do not understand or are too shy to use • Difficult applicability to global, multicultural companies

story-telling [39]. Action research is “genuine research” [39], due to the fact that it can meet requirement standards of rigorous inquiry within the realm of practical knowing and has the potential for enriching both scientific and practical knowing: therefore, this method’s rigour and soundness can enhance story-telling’s scientific and practical contribution. And lastly, a strong parallelism is present between the role of the action researcher and that of the writer/narrator of story-telling and narrative: due to her or his third-party role of facilitator, the action researcher is the most suitable quasi-omniscient narrator for IS-related stories, so as to guarantee holism and comprehensiveness

through an broader perspective on the events occurring; again, this concluding synergy applies to both narrative's writing and practical domains.

As a result, action research in its quest for collaborative solutions could both *act* by means of story-telling and narrative practices, and *preach, promote and spread* such practices among the company's human resources.

Advantages and disadvantages of story-telling and narrative as alternative genres in IS practice (with possible impacts for many studies, e.g. [40–47]) are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Synergies between action research (AR) and the genres of story-telling (S) and narrative (N).

• AR is designed to enable engagement, participation of the client is incentivized, and an exchange relationship is assumed; S/N aim at stimulating empathy and involvement in the reader/listener
• AR is constructed with people, is done with others, it has an inherent collaborative nature to provide a multidimensional description of the problem domain; S/N aim at depicting multiple perspectives and involve peers in the solution-crafting process
• In applied fields such as organization development (and IS is a lever for organizational development), AR is extremely useful to investigate complex phenomena from the inside, establishing strong communication flows with clients and participant; S/N can serve as an organizational development language based on dialogue and social discourse
• Being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible are required capabilities for both AR and S/N
• Rigor and soundness of AR as an established qualitative research methodology can enhance S/N scientific contribution
• The Action Researcher is best suited to take on the role of S/N facilitator and quasi-omniscient narrator, to ensure holism and comprehensiveness

4 Conclusions

In this manuscript, we have presented an implementation of story-telling and narrative as alternative genres for writing IS publications. We argue that the incremental introduction of these genres, their principles and their features would be beneficial to IS research, as it would enable a revisited and unconventional representation of IS themes that extends the boundaries of canonical genres. In parallel, thanks to the peculiarity of the case we have been involved in – which is, fundamentally, a story on the use of stories on information systems implementation – we claim that story-telling and narrative are also powerful instruments supporting IS practice.

Story-telling hence abridges IS publication and practice, since it represents both the object and the means of communication of the study. We propose that the alternative genres investigated possess the power to frame both the writing and the practical domains of IS: in the former, their core value lies in conveying a multifaceted meaning of IS studies, while creating empathy in the reader, inducing a negotiation of diverging perspectives and avoiding the exclusion risk related to the usage of technical language;

while in the latter, they can serve as supporting instruments to engage human resources, resolve conflicts and enable change.

In this inherent link between IS publication and practice enabled by the properties of story-telling and narrative, we also recognize a mediating role of action research. On the one hand, since the research activity is part of the researcher's own human experiences and memories, consistently with [8] such activity should be quite naturally reported through narrated stories. On the other, action researchers can achieve their practical outcomes in IS projects by both using and sponsoring the use of story-telling and narrative communication practices.

Consistently with this finding, we propose the template on action research from [4] could be extended to explicitly include the element of "Narration", based on a properly reinterpreted set of narrative's principles and features.

With this compromising proposal, we wish not to deny the value of narrative as a possibly stand-alone genre for scientific publications: however, we believe a smoother migration from the *status quo* of IS publication – this migration being achieved through a gradual inclusion of the narrative genre's principles among the principles and structure of canonical action research writing [48] – would reduce resistance, facilitate accreditation and stimulate adoption of the alternative genre. An incremental inclusion that leverages the methodological protocols and approaches found in action research theory should also facilitate narrative accrual, catalysing the development of an IS body of knowledge based on stories and narrations. This open issue may represent an opportunity for future research endeavours.

It is our hope that our proposals will breathe new life into IS publication and writing styles, as well as provide a fresh perspective to look at IS practice.

Indeed, story-telling narrative constitute both a way of constructing human plights and a guide for using mind [8], which could be significantly helpful in the fascinating process of IS publication writing, and, relatedly, in applying IS as a practice.

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