PLOTTING A TV SHOW ABOUT NOTHING
PATTERNS OF NARRATION IN SEINFELD

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When Jerry (Jerry Seinfeld) and George (Jason Alexander) on the NBC sitcom Seinfeld pitched an idea for a new sitcom to a television network, they proposed a concept for their fictional show-within-the-show which was clearly intended to describe the actual Seinfeld series itself. With its reflexive plotline Seinfeld created a distinguishing label for itself as "a show about nothing." Characters hang out at a coffee shop, visit each others' apartments, and talk. Characterizing Seinfeld as in this manner is an intuitively correct way to describe the show; but, this self-defined label also hides the fact that Seinfeld is one of the most densely plotted comedies on television. Its rapid narrative pace and intricately interwoven plot lines belie this label. At times it seems to be a show with too much going on, rather than "nothing happening."

How is it possible for a show to have a breakneck narrative pace and yet also seem to have "nothing happening?" How do you plot a episode "about nothing?" Seinfeld's strategy uses innovative narrative patterns which differentiate the show from more conventional comedies. The result is not merely a show about trivial things, but a show whose untraditional narrational structures and devices can produce a great deal of plot from seemingly "nothing."

PLOTLINES WITH GOALS: WRITING BY THE BOOK

Before examining the construction of Seinfeld, we should briefly survey the principles for constructing a traditional narrative in which "something" clearly happens. Mainstream films and television programs offer variations on what David Bordwell dubbed the canonic story form. This dominant narrative form is organized around a single protagonist's pursuit of a goal. The initial exposition clearly lays out the consistent set of character traits which motivate the protagonist toward achieving the goal. The protagonist's individual actions then drive the plot. Though the protagonist frequently has allies, the goal should be attained primarily through the protagonist's efforts (e.g., the detective protagonist should solve the mystery, not one of the supporting characters). Coincidence plays virtually no part in the well-made

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canonic story (the detective discovers a suspect because he/she has followed a chain of clues, not because he/she happens to be in the right place at the right time).

The protagonist’s attainment of the goal is blocked not by large social forces but by a single character who personifies the forces opposing the protagonist. The narrative reveals a series of obstacles which the leading character must overcome to attain the goal state. Each of the protagonist’s actions to overcome an obstacle has direct consequences, setting up a new set of circumstances which the character must confront. Such chains of obstacles and actions can end with the protagonist either happily achieving the goal (the most frequent case) or not, but these stories must end clearly with all major plot questions resolved unambiguously.

The canonic story form which Bordwell articulates in *Narration in the Fiction Film* comes from classical Hollywood film, but the television sitcom also leans heavily on this form (with a few alterations). Since the thirty minute comedy has limited time for exposition, the sitcom creates easily comprehensible predicaments with which the character must struggle. Such “situations” are basic enough to be recognized quickly by a viewer grazing through the channels and concise enough to be summarized in a short sentence in the television listings. The series of obstacles placed in the sitcom character’s way is not as lengthy as it would be in a ninety minute comedy, but the character-driven pursuit of a goal is just as dominant in the sitcom as it is in the classical Hollywood film.

*M*A*S*H* was influential in expanding the situation comedy form from a single goal-oriented plotline to a double plotline structure. Rather than arranging the entire cast’s actions around a single protagonist’s goal pursuit, sitcoms presented two separate plotlines, each with a cast member as the action-driven protagonist. One of these plotlines might be given less air time than the other, or one might be more “serious” and the other “lighter,” but both protagonists would pursue their goals in the trait-driven, obstacle-encountering method outlined above. Characters in the ensemble might serve as confidants or helpers, but the two protagonists pursue their goals independently, creating parallel plotlines.

As the sitcom form continued to develop, it added more and more plotlines. *Night Court*, for example, gave individual plotlines to several different characters, forcing the sitcom form to convey situations and resolve plotlines in ever terser, more efficient ways. Either characters brought their individual predicaments with them when they first entered from offscreen space or their narrative situations were quickly defined soon after their initial entrances. The sitcom form evolved to pack more plot into the allotted half-hour, developing shorthand mechanisms for instigating and resolving plotlines which relied on an increasingly media-savvy sitcom viewer.

*Seinfeld*, like many sitcoms, uses a multiple plotline structure. In each episode there are at least four separate plotlines, usually one for each of the primary characters: Jerry, George, Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) and Kramer (Michael Richards). Sometimes single characters serve double duty as protagonists in two separate plotlines. For instance, in one episode Jerry investigates whether or not his Uncle Leo owes Jerry’s mother money from decades ago, while Jerry simultaneously vows to stop kissing people hello. *Seinfeld’s* narrational structure can instigate and resolve up to six separate plotlines in a single episode.
Plotlines without Goals: The Seinfeld Scenario

Other sitcoms also rely on a multiple plotline device, but they do not have the distinctive plot structure used by the writers of Seinfeld. Seinfeld distributes the various characteristics of the canonic story form among its various plotlines. One plotline will include certain subfunctions of the canonic story and another will emphasize other subfunctions, but rarely will a single Seinfeld plotline follow the canonic form to the letter. Instead each plotline tends to assemble a patchwork of the canonic narrative elements.

There are three basic types of Seinfeld plotlines, each one containing a few elements of canonic storytelling. One type of storyline occurs when a character does a seemingly simple action on a whim and then has to live with the disastrous series of circumstances which result from this innocent choice. For instance, Jerry lies to a policewoman he’s romantically interested in, telling her that he doesn’t watch Melrose Place. Then he spends the rest of the plotline trying to defend a fib he admits was too silly to lie about in the first place. In another example, George decides to answer a personal ad in the Daily Worker, and as a ramification of this quick decision, he discovers he is suspected of being a Communist.

In a whim/ramifications plotline, actions have direct consequences and set up circumstances which the character must confront, as in the canonic story form. However, these actions are not taken in pursuit of a goal, nor are these actions done as an expression of the character’s consistent traits. Jerry doesn’t hide his Melrose Place viewing because of his character’s tendency toward concealment, nor does George pick up the Daily Worker because of a long-standing distrust of capitalism. Instead the actions were taken on a whim without much thought concerning possible ramifications. The joke is that such seemingly simple actions do have dire circumstances in the Seinfeld universe, as dire as if these actions were part of the pursuit of a serious goal.

The second type of Seinfeld plotline is organized around the personal antagonism between two characters. In this scenario each character is motivated simply by a desire to gain the upper hand. Kramer gets into an argument with a monkey and refuses to apologize, or he argues with a homeless man who refuses to return his Tupperware. Elaine and an old boyfriend, each trying to attain a dominant postbreakup position, struggle over which one of them last contacted the other.

Personal antagonism is of course a hallmark of the canonic story form. The single antagonist is the primary narrational means of focusing the obstacles to the protagonist’s goal pursuit. In these Seinfeld plotlines, however, the antagonist does not oppose the protagonist’s goal achievement because Kramer and Elaine are not pursuing exterior goals at all. All Kramer or Elaine want is to emerge at the end of the episode in a dominant position vis a vis their opponent. Antagonism is not justified as an opposition to the protagonist’s goal; instead it exists of its own rationale, an end in itself separated from the goal orientation of canonic structure.

These two types of plotline discussed here differ from the canonic story form primarily because they lack its strong goal orientation. Whim/ramification plotlines are not forward looking (toward a goal) but are driven by circumstances in the past (trying to deal with the dire consequences of simple actions). Personal antagonism storylines are not oriented toward a goal other than simply gaining the upper hand. These differences help explain how so much plot can be occurring in an individual Seinfeld episode while there seems to be “nothing” going on. Seinfeld has numer-
ous plot occurrences in a single episode, but these events tend not to be structured in a traditional goal-oriented narrative pattern. Although much is going on, the plot doesn’t seem to be moving forward because these storylines are not organized around a strong narrative payoff at the end of the episode.

**HOW TO GET YOUR GOAL THE **SEINFELD** WAY**

Not every *Seinfeld* plotline lacks a strong orientation toward a final resolution and payoff. The third type of *Seinfeld* storyline is simply a goal-oriented plot. Elaine wants to get into a romantic relationship with a gay man by getting him to “change teams” (a *Seinfeld* euphemism for switching sexual orientations). Jerry wants to keep his high school reputation as the fastest kid in school, even if it means racing an old rival. Each plotline has the simple “did they or didn’t they” ending characteristic of canonic storytelling (did Jerry win the race or not?).

*Seinfeld* episode has one and only one such strongly goal-oriented plotline. This structurally acknowledges that even a show in which “nothing happens” requires some of the impetus provided by goal-oriented narration to provide mainstream audience pleasures. But even the goal-oriented plotlines in *Seinfeld* operate with a non-canonic twist.

When *Seinfeld* characters go after a goal, one of three things can happen:

1) The characters fail to get or keep the goal due to reasons beyond their control. If they do actually achieve their goal, this state is merely temporary and can change quickly without their influence. After Elaine induces the gay man she is enamored with into “changing teams,” their relationship is short-lived because of her relative inadequacy in dealing with the male “equipment” (Seinlanguage for genitalia). She cannot possibly compete romantically with the expertise of gay lovers who have access to the “equipment” 24 hours a day, and so she loses her lover due to factors beyond her control. In canonic storytelling protagonists may achieve their goals or not, but they always win or lose based on their own efforts, not on external factors. In *Seinfeld* circumstances outweigh the actions of any character to get what they want.

2) The characters succeed in their goal, but not because of personal actions. When Jerry wants to regain a Super Bowl ticket he gave to a friend, he merely looks on in dismay as the ticket rapidly changes hands from Elaine to Newman (Wayne Knight) and back again to the friend. He actually ends up with the ticket he desires, though he does nothing whatsoever to get it. Newman in this same episode provides a more remarkable instance of this principle. Through no action of his own, Newman gets a Super Bowl ticket, narrowly escapes from a losing game of Risk with Kramer, and gets free furniture. Thus Newman gets the payoffs from three separate plotlines without doing anything to deserve it.

3) If they achieve the goal, they discover it is not what they want; then, they reverse their course. For instance, George spends half of an episode trying to induce his girlfriend into evicting her male roommate, thus removing a potential contender for her affections. Once the girlfriend actually decides to eject her roommate, George realizes that he has inadvertently made more of a commitment to this woman than he really wants, and he spends the second half of the episode trying to get out of the relationship.

On *Seinfeld* gaining your goal is not the positive payoff expected in a canonic story. Instead it often sets up a new goal: trying to get out of the situation the charac-
ter worked so hard to get into. While Hollywood storytelling tends to confirm the “work hard and you’ll achieve your dreams” ethic by repeatedly showing protagonists successfully laboring to achieve their goals, Seinfeld turns this central myth of American capitalism on its ear. In this show, working to achieve desires has little to do with whether or not characters actually attain them. This contributes to the perception that “nothing happens,” since character effort has limited effect on the final outcome.

**Weaving Coincidence into Community**

Many television situation comedies now use multiple plotlines, which not only boosts the potential number of narrative payoffs but also increases the chance that a viewer will find a plotline he/she likes in a given episode. The way Seinfeld weaves these plotlines remains a distinguishing characteristic of its narrational structure, further accentuating the impression that “nothing is happening.”

When other sitcoms use multiple plotlines, these stories tend to occur independently of each other. Though the storylines exist in the same timeframe in the episode, they take place parallel to each other with little or no interaction between the separate plotlines. Though dialogue in one plotline may make passing reference to what is going on in other portions of the episode, events in one plotline generally do not impinge in a narratively significant way on the show’s other subnarratives. A plotline is literally “Harry’s” or “Christine’s” story; other characters in the ensemble merely serve supporting roles in each other’s stories.14

On Seinfeld, however, the cause-and-effect chain of the different plotlines is intertwined throughout the episode in a particularly distinctive manner. The simplest way of linking plotlines is to have a single minor character who plays a narratively crucial role in more than one plotline, thus “bridging” the two stories. In one episode Elaine’s Communist boyfriend is a crucial player in her battle with a Chinese restaurant.15 The boyfriend also intervenes in Kramer’s plotline, convincing Kramer that he is being exploited as a capitalist lackey by working as a department store Santa. In another episode a homeless man who has been involved in Kramer’s plotline affects George’s story when the homeless man catches George’s toupee (which Elaine throws out a window).16 The same man, now wearing George’s toupee, returns to Kramer’s plotline to identify Kramer in a police lineup. Minor characters on Seinfeld do not “belong” to one primary character; instead they can function as “bridge characters,” serving narratively significant tasks in multiple plotlines.

Seinfeld narratives are further intertwined because one character’s plotline will frequently initiate another character’s plotline. In more traditional multiple plotline structures, characters tend to make their initial entrances with their own particular situation already in progress, which is a quick and efficient way of setting subsidiary stories into motion. Usually a sitcom will only take the time to instigate one plotline onscreen, and that plotline is generally the main narrative situation.

On Seinfeld, however, only one or perhaps two plotlines begin in media res. Major characters will participate in an episode for a longer period of time before their own particular plotline begins, and these plotlines always develop as a side effect of a current storyline. Instead of remaining separate, Seinfeld storylines actually give birth to one another. Without the circumstances which develop as part of one plotline, the other plotlines could not begin. For example, in one episode George is busy dealing with the ramifications of his quick decision to tell his current girlfriend that he loves her.17 Along the way he happens to mention that his girl-
friend works at the zoo and can give his friends a tour. This sets Kramer’s plotline (concerning a personal antagonism with a monkey) into motion.

Plotlines in Seinfeld also interact at other times besides their beginnings. When one storyline stalls, another storyline can intervene to provide important narrative information which jumpstarts the plot again. When George tells his zookeeper girlfriend that he loves her, she seemingly rebuffs him by replying, “Let’s go get something to eat.” At this point George’s narrative comes to a halt because George has no idea how to remove himself from an awkward situation. Kramer, while working through the fallout from his imbroglio with a monkey, discovers that George’s zookeeper girlfriend can’t hear in one ear. When he gives this information to George, George realizes that his girlfriend may not have heard him say “I love you,” which puts George’s plotline into motion again.

Seinfeld plotlines often need these interventions because plotlines on the show have a tendency to reach narrative stasis without obvious ways of moving forward. Without strong goal orientation to drive the plotline forward, a whim/ramifications or personal antagonism storyline can stall. Seinfeld’s creative solution is to use plot information from one character’s plotline to set another character’s narrative into motion again.

The show also weaves its plotlines together by transforming what initially seem to be trivial bits of dialogue into narratively significant information. Traditional sitcoms contain throwaway jokes on topics not directly concerned with the plot. Such sitcoms wander only briefly from the topic at hand to deliver a small joke, and then the narrative storyline quickly regains its centrality, never mentioning the throwaway topic again.

On Seinfeld the slightest subject conversationally mentioned in dialogue may reappear later in the episode as something of great import. For example, George refuses Jerry’s offer of Super Bowl tickets because he wants to avoid an awkward discussion with his new girlfriend:

GEORGE
She’d ask about the sleeping arrangements. I find those sleeping arrangement conversations depressing.

JERRY
Yeah, sleeping arrangements. So you haven’t...uh... .

GEORGE
Oh, no, no, no. I haven’t even seen her apartment yet. Tomorrow night is the first night.18

This mention of “sleeping arrangements” initially seems like a throwaway line which is not marked as being significant to any of the plotlines. Later on in the episode, however, Elaine finds herself in the awkward position of having the “sleeping arrangement” discussion with her date. This echo asks viewers to recall the earlier dialogue and revise their initial label of the material as trivial.

One of the tasks of narration is to foreground the most crucial bits of plot information and to relegate other less important information to the narrative background.
Assigning relative narrative significance to dialogue lines is a crucial part of plot structuring. *Seinfeld* plays with traditional plotting hierarchies by reviving briefly mentioned conversational topics and foregrounding them as significant subjects in the narrative.

It is frequently hard to predict whether a momentary topic on *Seinfeld* will remain of fleeting significance or whether it will reappear as an important part of the plot. Is a brief discussion (such as following one) merely a conversational aside or will it become relevant later?

GEORGE
Say it’s Saturday night in Spain.
They go out dancing. Think they do the flamenco?

JERRY
I would think.

GEORGE
So you could call a woman for a date, ask her if she’s free for dinner and a flamenco?

JERRY
You don’t flamenco on the first date.

GEORGE
I wish the flamenco was popular here.

JERRY
Yeah? Would you do it?

GEORGE
Yes, I think I would.

JERRY
Well, I knew you had an affinity for it because it’s the dance of a very proud people.

Such a *Seinfeld* snippet may reappear within the same plotline, in a totally different plotline, or not at all. The topics which are not pursued (the flamenco is never mentioned again) seem just as potentially significant (or insignificant) as the topics which later become narratively important. Thus the narration gives a sense of unpredictability, since any barely mentioned topic in one plotline may become a determining factor in another.

It is important to note the large parts coincidence and unpredictability play in these narrational strategies. A topic mentioned offhand or a decision made on a whim may become the crux of a series of narrative events, or it may not. Gaining or losing a goal seems more dependent on chance than on any individual’s efforts. Success on *Seinfeld* is often a matter of being in the right place at the right time (like the homeless man who happens to be in the right spot to catch George’s toupee). Such coincidences are to be avoided at all costs in well-made canonic storytelling. Characters
must have a motivation to be in the right place at the right time; relying on coincidence seems to be an easy out which violates the rules of mainstream storytelling.

In the Seinfeld universe coincidence plays so large a part that it becomes a general principle which binds the characters. The fates of these fictional people are so interrelated that no one within the Seinfeld society can seemingly do or say anything without setting off unexpected ramifications in the other characters' lives. One of the primary sources of the show's humor is the idea that the simplest actions can have extraordinary consequences (e.g., chewing Juju Fruit can end a relationship). This humor is made possible because the characters are bound together in a network, not merely a group of independent agents who form a kind of "family" (as in most sitcoms) but a truly interdependent community of people whose destinies are interwoven through an alternative form of cause-and-effect. The narrational strategies outlined here provide the interconnecting principles which tie this community together.

A Comic Community in Context

Like any true community, the Seinfeld network of characters establishes social norms and rules for appropriate behavior. Much of the show's comedy involves disagreements over what the rules of the community are. If someone gives a homeless person food in Tupperware containers, is he/she obligated to return the Tupperware? Why is there a norm for kissing people hello, and how does one get out of this habit? Is telephoning someone the proper way to thank them for a gift, or is it sufficient to thank them when you receive the gift? When you get a gift, is it appropriate to give the present to someone else ("regifting")? Such questions are central to most Seinfeld episodes, and these questions over social nuances only make sense when there is a strong set of implicit norms for behaving in the community. These rules are discussed as if they were obviously and firmly established, but such minute, idiosyncratic rules do not exist in the larger society. These are local rules which define action in the Seinfeld subculture alone.

This emphasis on social subtleties occurs at a time when the rules governing action in the larger society seem to be disintegrating. Yet Seinfeld recognizes that disagreements over social norms are a rich source of comedy. Social norms provide a structure which the narrative can violate in order to provide comedy or to bring star-crossed lovers together. Seinfeld recognizes the narrative advantages of having such social structures in place, and so, the show develops its own idiosyncratic norms for the characters to violate in humorous ways. Without the dense interconnections among characters' fates created by Seinfeld's innovative narrative strategies, this community could not create the nuanced social structure which ties them together and provides much comic potential.

The impression Seinfeld is a show about merely hanging out and talking makes sense because of the potential hazards of virtually any activity whatsoever in this universe. Almost any action must be discussed to see if it is consistent with the implicit, subtly negotiated rules of conduct in the Seinfeld subculture. Characters discuss the normative ramifications of an action before they do it, and they evaluate the response's appropriateness afterwards. In the canonical story words and actions certainly have consequences, but on Seinfeld words and actions can have too many unpredictable consequences, which motivates the characters' tendency toward stasis, toward sitting in the coffee shop and talking.
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In the age of the "slacker," Seinfeld creates an alternative scenario to the American ideal of strongly goal-oriented individual. By doing nothing one is just as likely to succeed as if one actively pursues one's dreams. In the age of increased global interconnectivity, the show questions whether any action, no matter how small, can remain isolated without intervening in other people's lives. The joke is that even when "nothing is happening," there's an awful lot going on.

Notes:

1. This article uses examples primarily from the 1994-5 season, and so there may be subtle differences between the narrational patterns discussed here and ones in earlier episodes. A cursory examination of earlier episodes suggests that early Seinfeld uses similar strategies, merely with fewer plotlines per episode. Seinfeld's narrative pace appears to be getting faster.
14. Regular characters can take on a variety of supportive roles, either as confidant, advisor, or helper, but it still remains the responsibility of the principal character to make narratively significant strides toward their goal. On Night Court when Harry (Harry Anderson) has a personal crisis to solve, he may discuss his thoughts with Christine (Markie Post), receive lascivious advice from Dan (John Larroquette), and deal with Bull's (Richard Moll) well-meaning but bungling efforts to help, but only Harry's actions make a difference in resolving the situation. The same is true for each of the characters (each of whom may have a plotline of their own in the same episode).
20. In its most narrationally complex episodes, the show creates a densely woven arrangement of plot threads which are sometimes interconnected thematically as well.
21. In the 1994-5 season Seinfeld has begun to refer to plot information from earlier episodes, so that now an action's consequences may not simply be limited to a single episode but may affect events later on in the show's season.