CreaStoria: Experimenting with collaborative stories

Sean

This is a guest post by Christine Cuskley

TL;DR: Please and thank you play this thing for science.

Uncategorized

Insofar as the field of language evolution has even had time to spill a lot of ink about anything – if you take Pinker & Bloom's seminal 1990 paper as the starting point, the field is only just a carefree twenty-something – the focus of the field has primarily been about the finer points of language: syntax, the lexicon, the physiology of speech production, etc. But one's mid-twenties are a time for exploration, so, with my colleagues at the Social Dynamics Unit, we're looking towards something relatively unexplored in language evolution: stories.

It's almost impossible to imagine telling a story without language – how would you even begin? (Even Emoji Dick had to be translated from the original, and might not even be successful, and emojis arguably are language…but I digress…) So the questions emerge: why and how do we tell stories? Do stories simply take advantage of our ability to speak about things that are not present and/or are not concrete (or even real), or are they a key part in how language evolved the ability to do this? How do kinds of features of stories survive and replicate, and what features peter off and die? What selection pressures underlie this?

This is, of course a whole host of questions, none of which we can expect to find definitive answers to anytime soon – a feature shared by a lot of work in language evolution (and an exciting one, in my opinion). And of course, we're not jumping into a void: already there is work that focuses on the phylogeny of stories, the potential evolutionary function of stories, and also a fair bit of work on evolution in literature more generally, some of it featured right here on Replicated Typo. But we're taking a new experimental approach: we're crowd sourcing collaborative stories. We hope this will contribute to answering the last two questions in particular: how do stories evolve over time and respond to different constraints, and what features survive and replicate?

We're doing this using an experimental game called CreaStoria – game is a hybrid of choose your own adventure, Twitter, and a creative writing workshop. It works like this: we start with a bunch of single-sentence "story prompts" created in collaboration with Piano Piano Book Bakery in Rome, and these stories become the "root" for collaborative story trees. At each turn, a player is presented with three potential stories and has to choose which one to continue with their own short story, creating an element of preferential selection. After you've played, or between bouts of play (I hear it's great for procrastination, so feel free to come and go as you need it), you can look at the growing story tree and vote on stories you like (or don't).
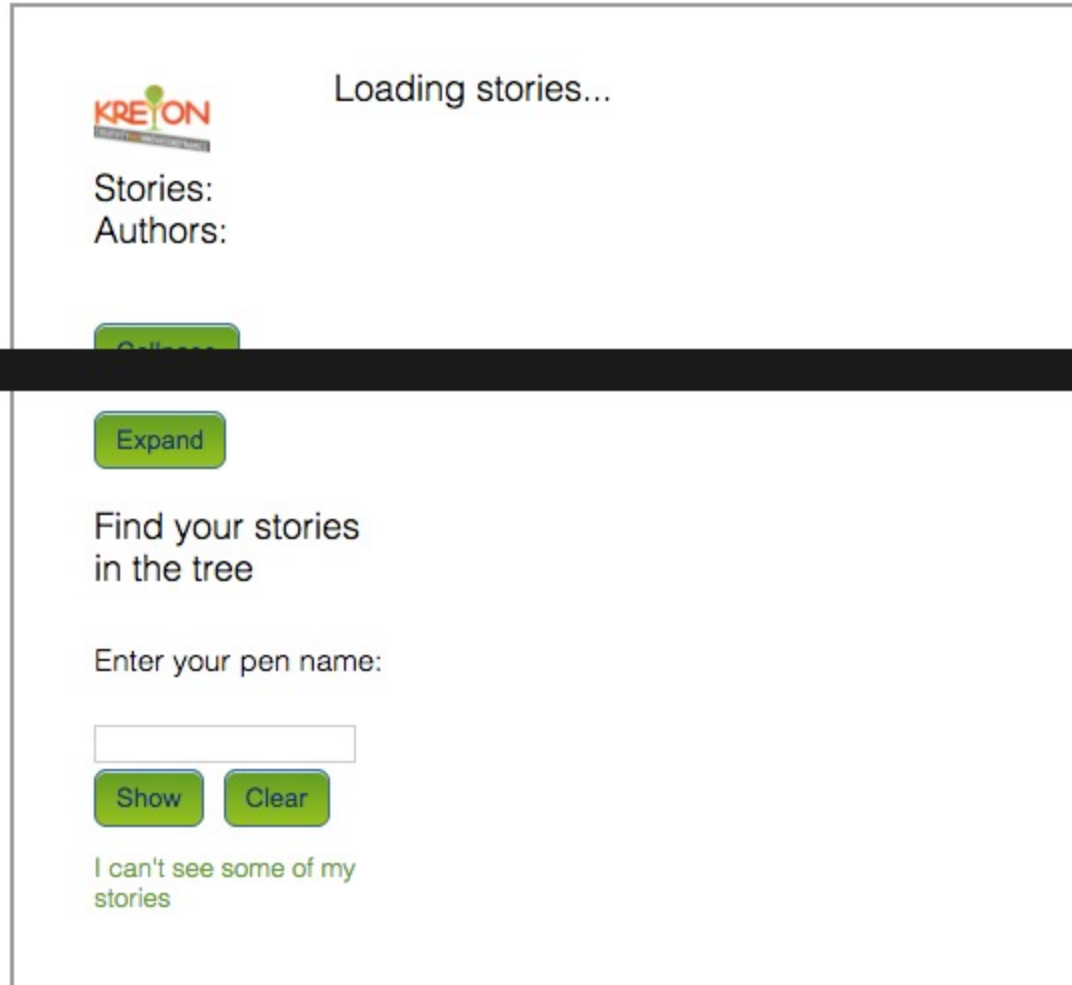
The inner workings are a bit more complicated than this, of course – I could tell you, but I'd have to "know your IP address and exclude any stories you write from our data" (*if you know what I mean*). We've had the opportunity to exhibit the game at a couple of live events in Italy, so the tree of Italian stories is pretty well populated – but we would really like more English data (and

play now and tell your friends! If you're curious as to how the data pans out, like the game on Facebook or follow @creastoria on Twitter to get updates.

Happy writing!

Christine Cuskley is a linguist/psychologist/nerd type who currently researches the evolution of language and communication in the Social Dynamics Unit at the Institute for Scientific Interchange in Turin, Italy, and will take up a position as a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Edinburgh from January 2016. She mostly retweets at @nerdpro.

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