Stories are a central part of human history and help define human society as a whole. Stories are used to pass down customs and traditions, to educate the masses, and to entertain. All story telling mediums can be categorized into one of three types: author driven, emergent, and a combination of the two. In completely author driven stories the user/listener is not given any control over the story and is only allowed to listen while the story unfolds through the authors will. In a emergent story medium the user is given (almost) complete control over what happens in the story and the author must react and change the story to accommodate the user. A medium must be interactive in order to have any form of emergent story behavior. In a mixed setting, the user and the author take turns adding to the story while attempting to maintain coherency. I am not going to argue that any form of storytelling is better than the other two. I am going to illustrate how the medium in which a story is told can restrict what kind of story is made.

Back with the first humans, stories were passed by word of mouth or created through play. Stories created through play are the purest form of emergent stories while stories told through word of mouth have the ability to be interactive or entirely author driven. An author driven story is the type of story where the story teller simply tells the story to a group of people. There is also the possibility of allowing the stories to be interactive at the time of telling the story. The story author can take the listener's suggestions and incorporate them into the story as it was being told thus creating a mixed initiative story experience (think of Dungeons and Dragons games). Play and storytelling by word of mouth are the most basic forms of storytelling and are emulated in part by storytelling mediums to come.

The next form of storytelling to emerge was cave paintings followed by printed text. Books and paintings try to mimic spoken stories. I am lumping these two together because they essentially had the same effect on story telling. Both cave paintings and printed text are inherently non-interactive and completely author driven. Some may be quick to point out that choose your own adventure books are an interactive form of printed text, but I would argue that choose you own adventure books just give the illusion of being interactive. No matter what path you choose through the book you are still getting some part of a preauthored story. Does your choice on which page to turn to actually change the outcome of the story in any significant way? You think that you choices matter in the story, but in reality you are following a branching tree story that was authored in advance. I argue that anything authored in advance like this can never be truly interactive. From here on the technology gets better, but not much changes. We go from books to theatre, to radio, to T.V. and Movies.

Theatre plays mimic play, as in how it is viewed, but are author driven instead of emergent. You can get a mixed model by allowing the audience to participate in the actions (like improve acting), but you will not get a completely emergent story from plays.

Radio mimicked word of mouth storytelling, but had a major drawback. It was impossible to have user interaction in the story. Radio created a limited form of word of mouth storytelling. Radio lost the ability to have listener interaction and thus became completely author driven.

After radio came the moving pictures of T.V. and Movies. While both T.V. and Movies are
a technological advancement over text, theatre, and radio, they still failed to add user interaction. Both are mediums for providing preauthored content and are not much different from theatre plays mentioned earlier. I have seen some DVD Movies that will stop at certain points and allow the watcher to choose the next video segment via an on screen menu, but this is no different than the choose your own adventure books mentioned earlier.

Up to now the only medium that could be considered truly emergent has been play. Now we hit the medium of video games. Video games can encompass the entire range from completely author driven to completely emergent depending on how the game is made. You can create a game made mostly out of cut scenes to create a movie like effect (Metal Gear Solid 4). You can, as in most games, create a world where the user has a limited set of actions they can perform in the world to create a mixed style story. You can also create a game that has a world, but no story in it whatsoever. You can give the user the ability to interact with said world in (almost) every way possible (ex: Minecraft). This would be an example of the completely emergent story. Note that this is the first time since the introduction of play that we see emergent stories again.

The implications of what it specifically means to have emergent story vs an author driven story and how to write for each of these will have to be left for my next post. For now it is worth noting that since the dawn of man, in all cases except for play, we have only been able to create completely author driven stories or some form of mixed story. We are just now getting to video games; a medium that allows for all sorts of types of storytelling. This is a new and exciting medium that deserves the same attention that we give all the other story telling mediums.