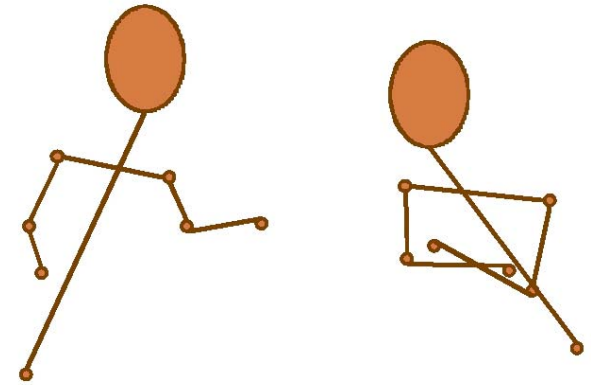# Rakontu GUI mockup
Cynthia Kurtz
last revised May 2009

For discussion by those interested in / helping with / participating in Rakontu development

What's Rakontu?

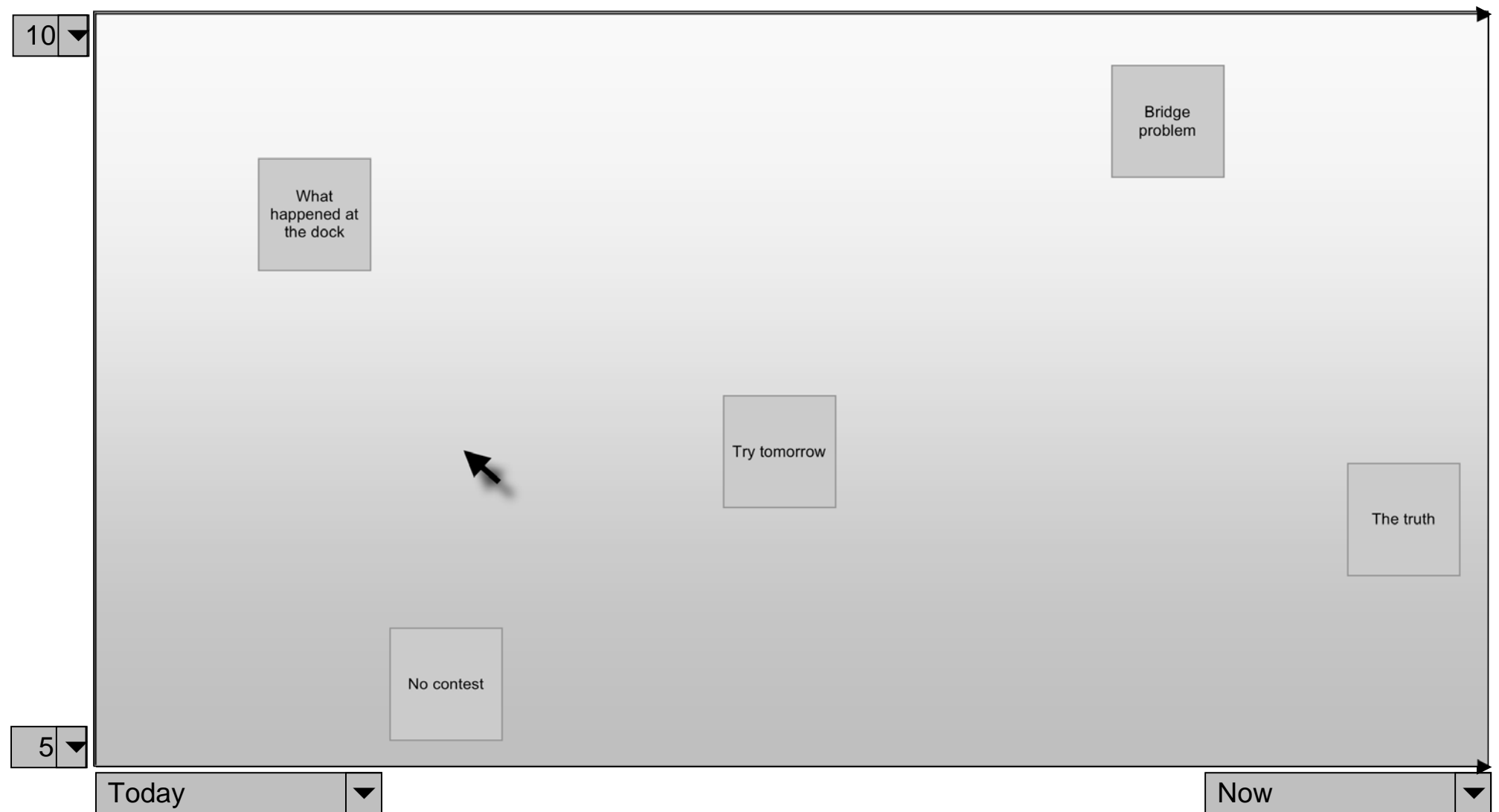Here's the web site: http://www.rakontu.org

Here's the blurb, if you haven't seen it:

We are building a free and open source software package called Rakontu ("tell a story" in Esperanto) to help communities share and work with raw stories of personal experience for mutual understanding, conflict resolution and decision support.

Why do communities need storytelling software? Long ago, community stories were tended by griots or shamans or bards or just older people. These story caretakers watched as stories formed patterns through time and space. They helped communities use their old and new stories to settle disputes and make decisions together. In many of today's communities, increased segregation of age groups, increased mobility, and increased consumption of packaged media have reduced the story caretaker role. The physical-digital split means that older people tell stories at the community center while younger people tell them on Facebook. As a result critical connections are not being tended and cannot be called upon in times of need.

Why stories? Storytelling is a unique mode of social interaction with a special place in community life. Stories help people probe sensitive topics safely, experience events through the eyes of others, and get past knee-jerk reactions to contentious issues.

What will Rakontu do? It will help communities talk (share and connect stories into webs of collective meaning), look (discover insight-creating patterns) and think (use stories for group sensemaking about decisions and conflicts).

10 ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

No contest

5 ▼

Today ▼   Now ▼

The visual area in the main Rakontu window will be a **time versus depth** 2D space. Stories appear as **rectangles** in the space. Story titles are entered by their tellers.

Time (on the X axis) can be zoomed in and out by some funky selection method similar to the Google stock graph timeline and other abundant examples. (This simple drawing is just a reference to something nicer.)

The Y axis represents **depth** through numbered layers in the story bank (similar to a soil seed bank and soil layers). Stories at the top are near the surface for the community, and things at the bottom are more buried. Here the user is looking at the top half of the story bank only (down to level 5). (It would be better not to make the user look at these numbers, but I'm putting them here to start thinking about the numerical scale and how it might work.)

10 ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth
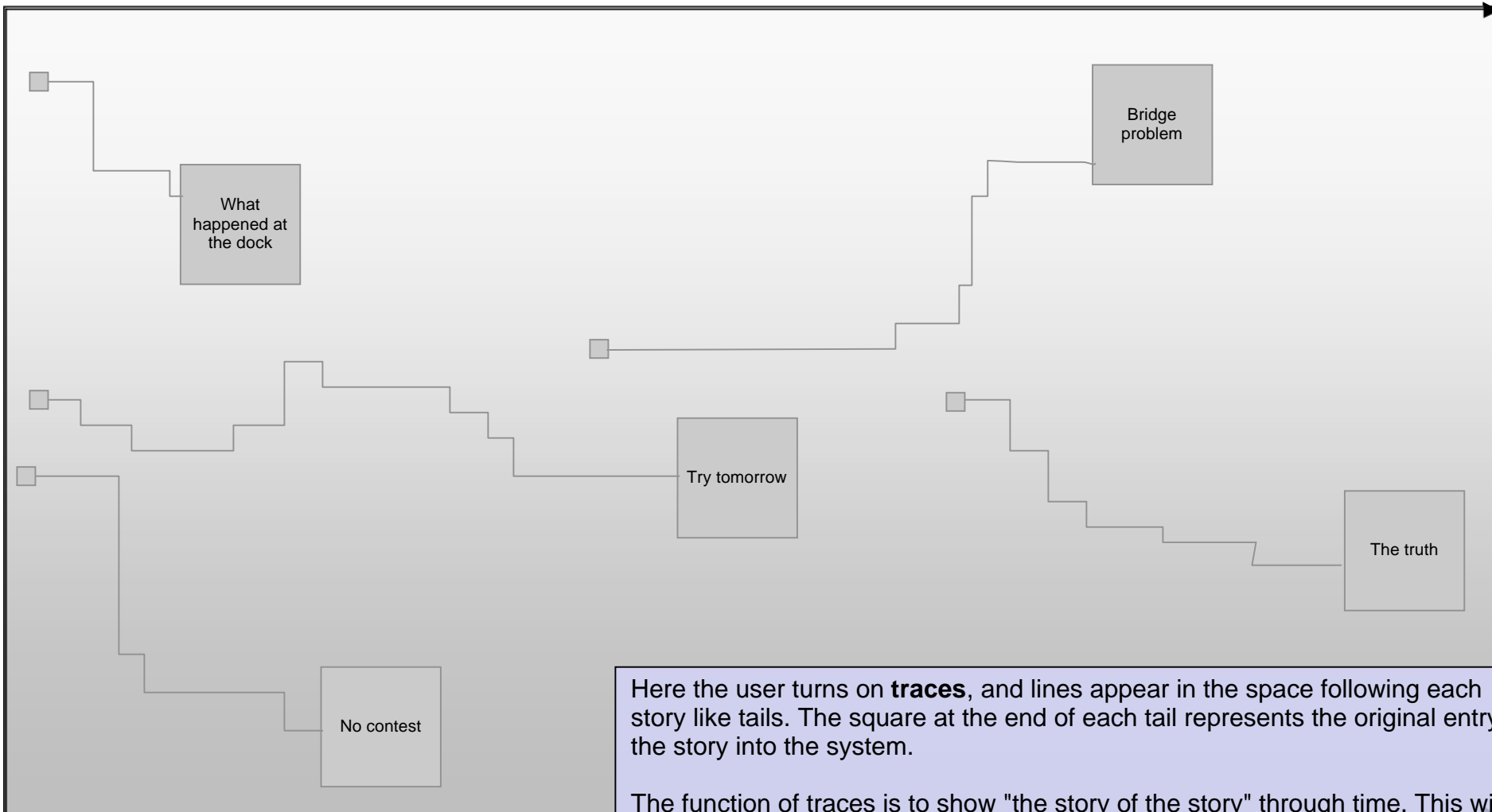
No contest

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

Four things can optionally affect vertical placement in depth layers:

time - stories naturally drift down over time at a steady pace
activity - what is happening to stories - are they being read, commented on, annotated, etc - the more activity the higher the story
valuation - explicit positive and negative recommendations added to stories by readers
matching - how well the stories match queries (of the moment or standing) set by the user

Three types of value are included:

safety / appropriateness / purity / health
importance / strength / power / centrality / sacredness
utility / usefulness / quality for a purpose

The first two of these have only one scale, while utility is represented by a series of scales important to the community (probably max 5). The user can use any or all of these factors to place items on the vertical axis (so it is a sort of patterning device). The horizontal axis is always time. The user can change the vertical placement algorithm moment by moment to see how different things "rise" or "fall" depending on what the user is paying attention to.

10 ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

No contest

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

⌒ ✔ Traces
Links:
➤ Retold
→ Reminded
-----▶ Related

Make traces from:
✔ Telling
✔ Interpreting
✔ Rating
✔ Tagging
✔ Commenting
Reading

Here the user turns on **traces**, and lines appear in the space following each story like tails. The square at the end of each tail represents the original entry of the story into the system.

The function of traces is to show "the story of the story" through time. This will give people an indicator of what the story means to the community as the community reads and reacts to it, *and as the community's needs change.* For example, if an old story suddenly "rises up" it means the community has new need of it.
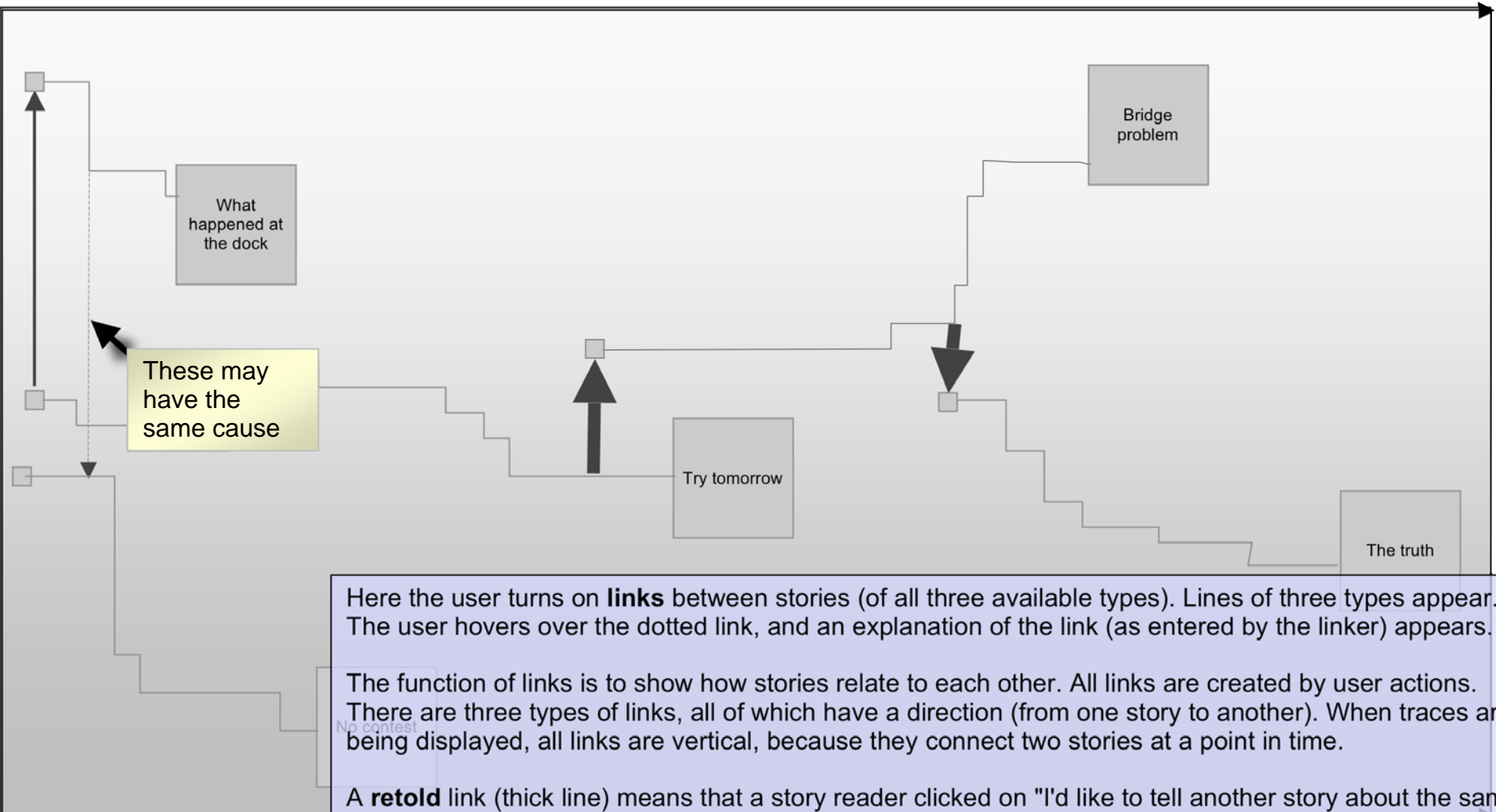
The end point of each trace is the last change to the story. In the case of an old story being found and taken up again (in discussion, for example) it will jump ahead and show a long straight trace line connecting old and new uses.

The user can decide which activities they want traces to depend on and show. One user might care about some activities that another does not. These preferences can also be changed per story or storyteller, so that for example a person can watch over their own stories in more detail than other stories.

10 ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

These may have the same cause

Try tomorrow

The truth

No contest

Here the user turns on **links** between stories (of all three available types). Lines of three types appear. The user hovers over the dotted link, and an explanation of the link (as entered by the linker) appears.

The function of links is to show how stories relate to each other. All links are created by user actions. There are three types of links, all of which have a direction (from one story to another). When traces are being displayed, all links are vertical, because they connect two stories at a point in time.

A **retold** link (thick line) means that a story reader clicked on "I'd like to tell another story about the same events from my perspective" and then told another story. In this case the story "Try tomorrow" was retold as "Bridge problem", which was retold as "The truth".

A **reminded** link (thin line) means that a story reader clicked on "This story reminds me of another story" and then told the other story. In this case "Try tomorrow" reminded someone of "What happened at the dock". Both reminded and retold links go from where the person read one story to where they created a new story.

A **related** link (dotted line) means that a person connected two stories after reading them both (either in this interface, or in a separate window). Related links, unlike retold and reminded links, can go from any point in one trace to any point in another.

With all link types the user can see the reason for the link (as entered by the person who linked the stories, for whatever reason) by hovering over it.

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

⌒ ✔ Traces
Links:
➡ ✔ Retold
→ ✔ Reminded
┄► ✔ Related

5

10 ▼

Bridge
problem

What
happened at
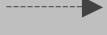the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

No contest

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

⌒ Traces ◣
Links:
➡ ✔ Retold
→ ✔ Reminded
⇢ ✔ Related

Here the user turns traces off while links are still on. The links move to be between story squares only. This is a relational but not chronological look at the links between stories.

6

10 ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

No contest

5 ▼

| Today | ▼ |

| Now | ▼ |

⌒ ✔ Traces
Links:
➡ Retold
→ Reminded
┈► Related

Here the user turns links off.

10 ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

🗗
📄
👤
👁
💬
❓
↕

No contest

Here the user clicks on a story, and a **story menu** appears on its right-hand side. The story menu includes several types of **annotations** that make up the **context** of the story. (I have artificially enlarged the item to make the icons more visible; this may or may not happen in practice depending on scaling issues.)

Hovering over each icon shows information about those elements, as follows:

🗗 - summary information
📄 - first part of story text
👤 - storyteller and their annotations
👁 - interpretations (sets of answers to questions)
▭ - tags
💬 - comments
❓ - requests (to transcribe, translate, etc)
↕ - nudges (ratings)

Clicking on the first and second icons (summary and text) opens either the full story information or just its text in a separate window.

Clicking on any of the other icons opens a sub-menu where those individual items (e.g., comments) can be examined. (We will next go through those.)

The truth

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

Bridge
problem

What
happened at
the dock

Story: Try tomorrow □

▸ Text

▸ Interpretations (3)

▸ Tags (7)

office hours
public communications
motives
trust
boats
docks
frustration

Try tomorrow

The truth

▸ Comments (9)

▾ Nudges (2+, 4 -)

Appropriateness:
+ *this is what we should be talking about*

Importance:
+ *we need to hold people accountable*

I would like to   nudge this story   ▼   Go

Here the user clicks on the ⊟ icon at the top of the story menu. A **detail window** appears with all information about the story in HTML form, with collapsible sections (prettier than this).

Some people don't like to learn the meanings of icons and symbols - so this entire menu display can be turned off if the user doesn't like seeing it. In that case they can just click on the story title to see this detail window (or maybe in a panel on the main window?).

At the bottom of the detail window are **things the user can do** in response to reading the story, such as tell another story from their perspective about the same events (a retelling), tell another story this story reminds them of (a reminding), link the story to another (a relating), and so on.

5

Today ▼

Now ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

No contest

I went to the front desk and they said the guy who does that is not here, try tomorrow. Well they said that yesterday and the day before! I am getting upset here! I'm just trying to get some answers about what I can and can't do with my lake dock, and I wonder if he was avoiding me. Are they trying to discourage people from having docks? What is going on?

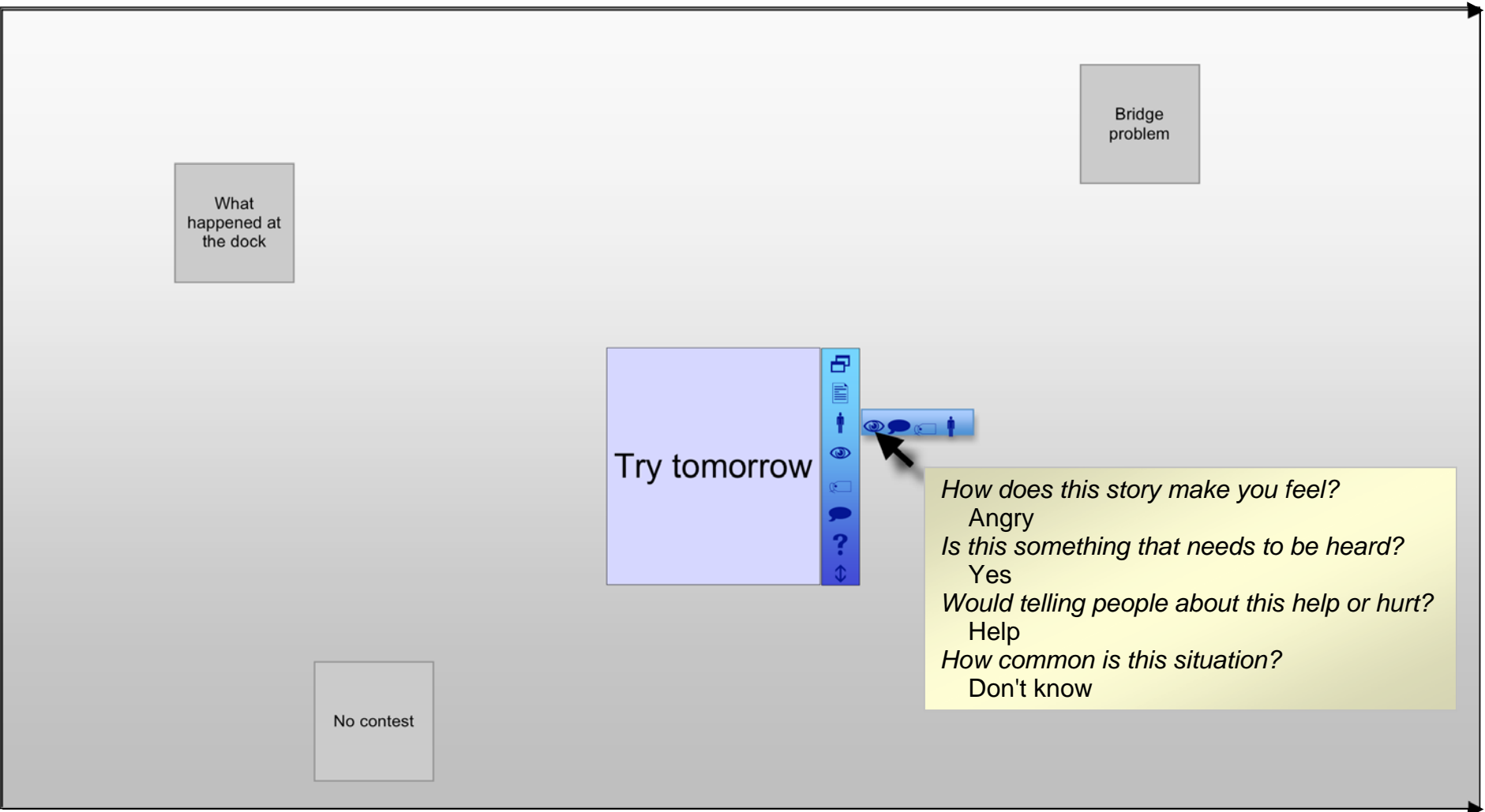Here the user hovers their mouse over the 📄 icon and reads the first part of the text of the story.

The user can set the preference of how much text to show in a hover-over window. Some people might want to read the whole thing that way, but some might not.

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

How does this story make you feel?
    Angry
Is this something that needs to be heard?
    Yes
Would telling people about this help or hurt?
    Help
How common is this situation?
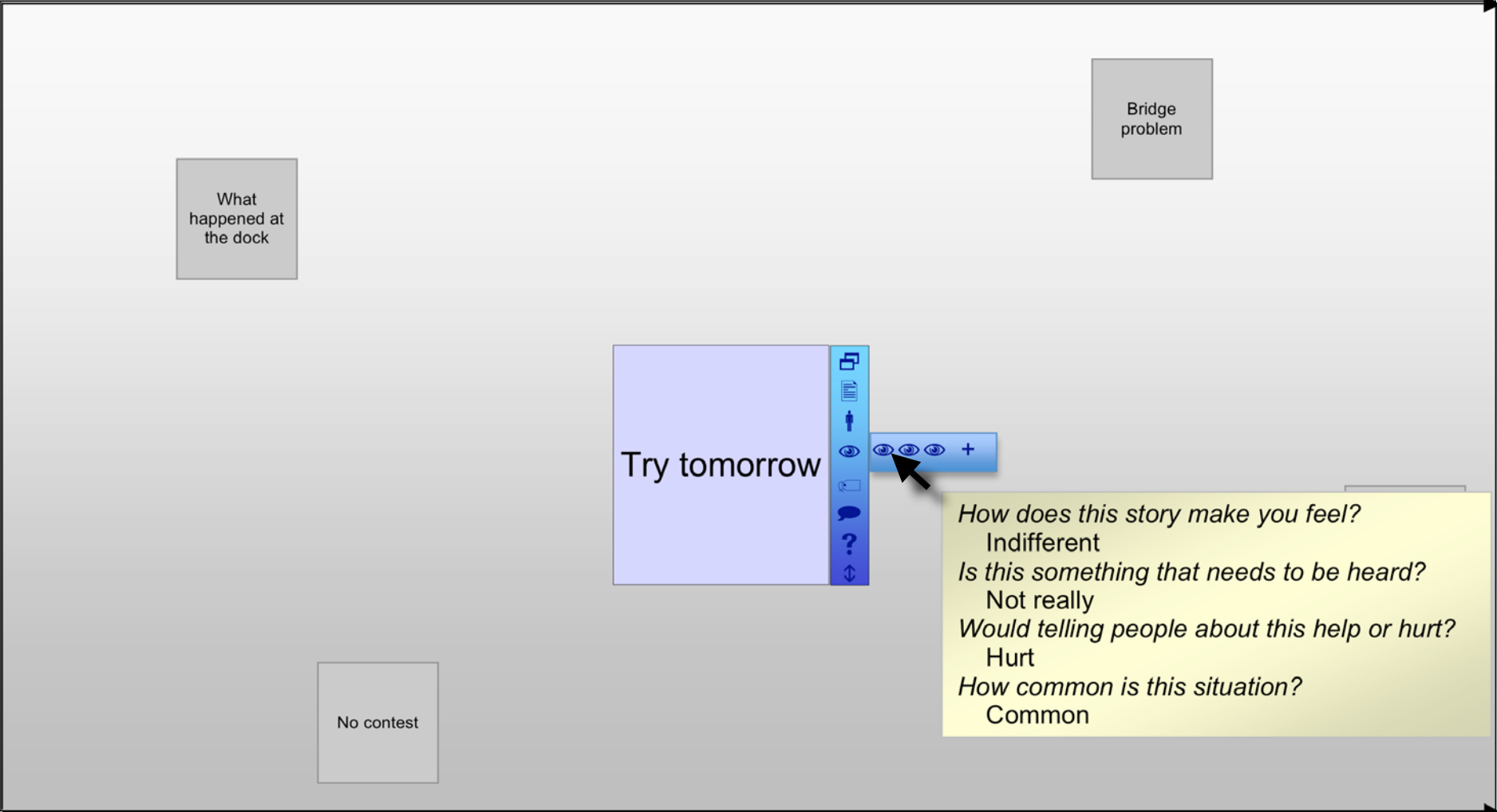   Don't know

No contest

Today ▼

Now ▼

Here the user has clicked on the 👤 icon. The storyteller menu has appeared to the right side of the main story menu.

The user has then hovered over the 👁 and the **storyteller's interpretation** of the story appears.

The storyteller can add comments, tags, interpretations, and requests to their own story, and they will appear here (separate from all other annotations).

Clicking on the 👤 at the end of the storyteller menu shows information about the storyteller's use of the system.

11

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

No contest

10 ▼

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

How does this story make you feel?
   Indifferent
Is this something that needs to be heard?
   Not really
Would telling people about this help or hurt?
   Hurt
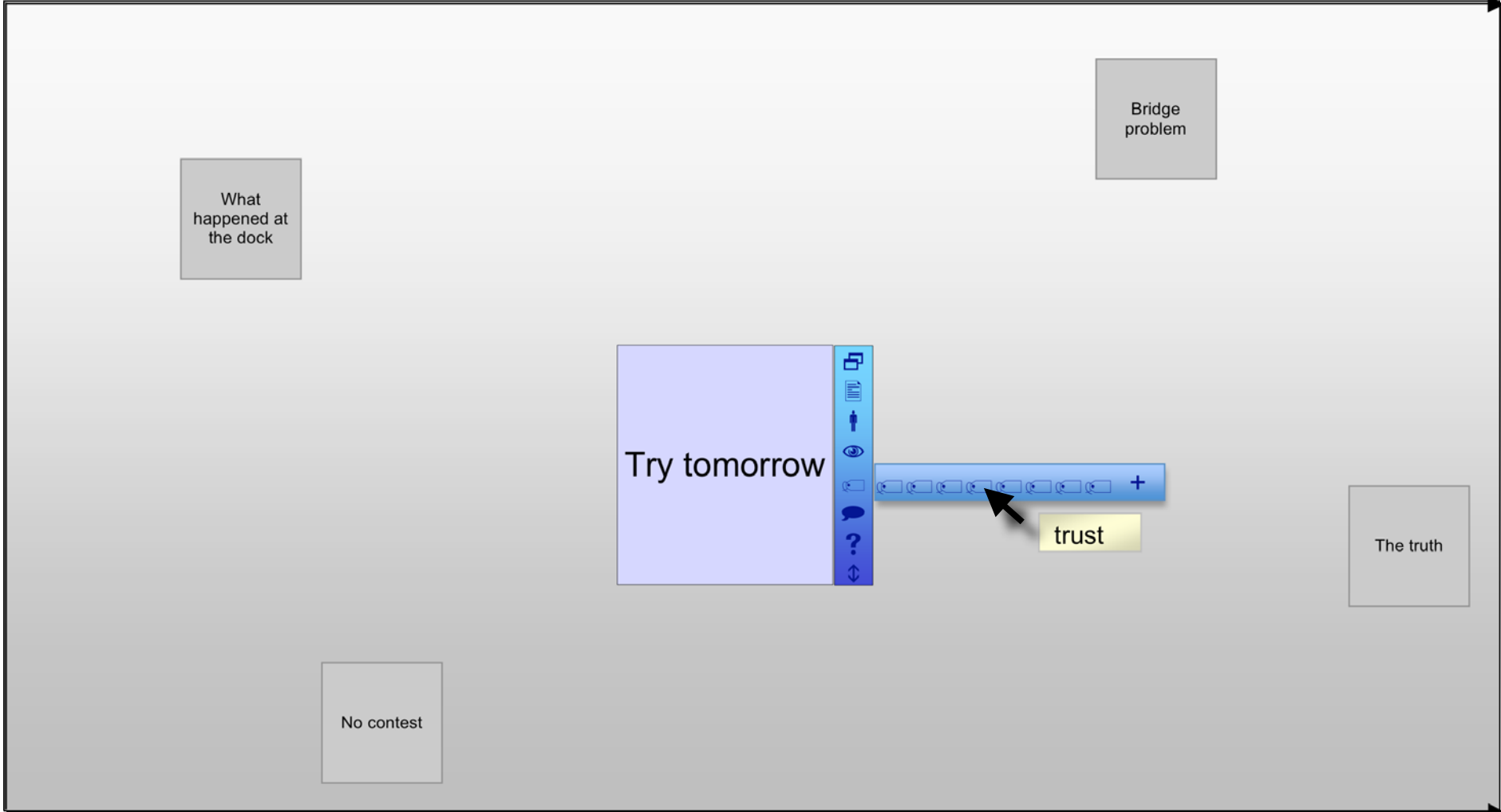How common is this situation?
   Common

Here the user has clicked on the 👁 icon. All the interpretations associated with the story (except that by the storyteller) appear to the right side of the main story menu. Notice the plus sign at the end; that is how the user adds new story annotations.

The user has then hovered their mouse over the first 👁 icon in the list; the **interpretation** of the story by someone who read it later is shown. They can see the difference in perspective in relation to the first interpretation.

One possibility here is to support a compare feature (similar to those on the web where you compare products) where you could rubber-band or shift-click select multiple interpretations and compare them in a table across all questions, or in a graph, or something. Possibly too elaborate, and this simple mousing over approach might be better. It is unlikely that stories will have a huge number of interpretations.

12

10 ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

trust

+

The truth

No contest

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

Here the user has clicked on the 🖰 icon, and a list of tags added to the story has appeared to the right side of the main story menu.

The user hovers their mouse over a 🖰 icon and reads the tag. Tags have these advantages over interpretations: they are easy and quick to add, and they give people an entirely open-ended way of organizing stories. And of course you would be able to query on tags (more on querying later).

13

10 ▼

Bridge
problem

What
happened at
the dock

Try tomorrow

+

The guy who deals
with docks is Jake
Smith, and I know
he's been sick lately.
-- Karen

The truth

No contest

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

Here the user clicks on 💬 to open the **comments**, then hovers over the third 💬 to read it.

In threads with too many comments to show in a small sub-menu, a number at the end will show how many are not shown, and if the user clicks on that number they will get the thread in a simple HTML window.

Individual comments can be marked as inappropriate by anyone, and people can set inappropriate thresholds (number of votes) below which they don't want to see comments. Some people might want to see more than others. Note that to simplify things stories will have only one comment thread (like blog posts do). Also, stories may end up being told in comments. Probably it is best to leave that alone and not try to force people to migrate them to stories. However, it should be easy to do so if someone tells a story in a comment and people want to save it. There should be some sort of "convert this comment to a story" function.

10 ▼

Bridge
problem

What
happened at
the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

Add request to: Called & Called, No one home

What would you like someone to do?

translate this to Russian ▼

5

Would you like to add a comment?

My grandmother would love to hear this story.

Now ▼

To whom would you like to attribute the request?

Myself (John M.) ▼

Add my request   Cancel making this request

Here the user clicks on **?** to open the
requests, then clicks the + to add one.

The request system is a way of helping the
community maintain its story bank together, by
tying appeals for action to particular stories.
Common requests might be for transcription,
reading aloud, translation, error checking, and
adding annotations.

10 ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

No contest

Could somone please translate this to Russian? My grandmother would love to hear this story.
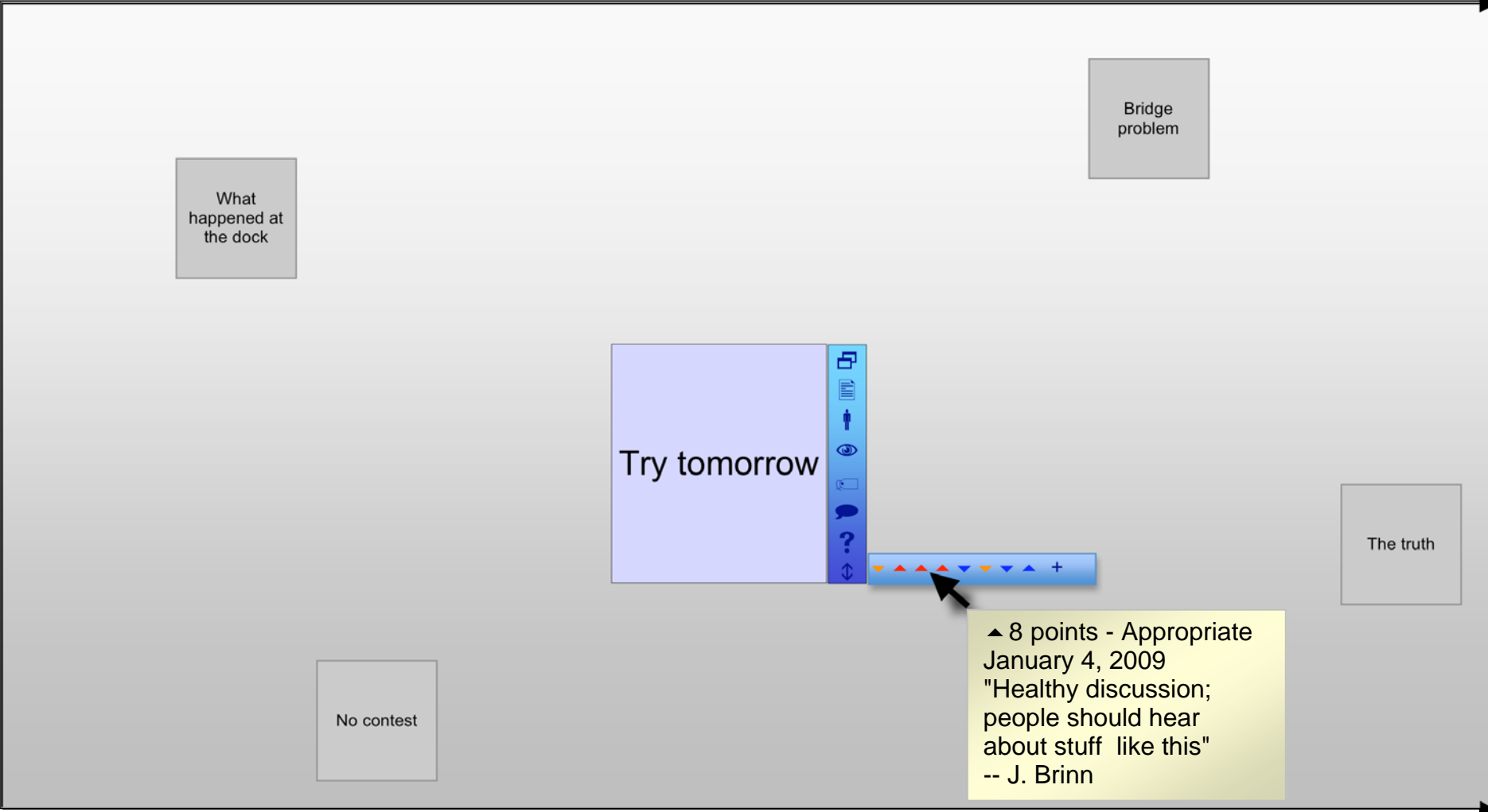-- John M.

(Click to edit)

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

Now the user can review how their new request looks. Since they are the request's creator, they get an extra link to edit the request.

10 ▼

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

▲ 8 points - Appropriate
January 4, 2009
"Healthy discussion;
people should hear
about stuff like this"
-- J. Brinn

No contest

5 ▼

Today

Now

Here the user has clicked on the ↕ icon, then hovered over one of the nudges. The user who nudged the story has added a comment.

The nudge system is sort of like Slashdot's karma system. Users **earn nudge points** by participating: telling stories, commenting, interpreting, etc. They get more points the more often and more widely they contribute. They can use the points to nudge stories up or down, but each person can only use some fixed maximum number of points per story (otherwise the whole thing could become a tool of a vocal minority). Points fade away if not used over time.

One issue with nudges is that if the nudge-point system is coarse-grained (ie people get and use few points) it will be difficult to place stories in vertical space (if only nudges are considered) so that they do not sit exactly on top of each other. For that reason it is probably better to "inflate" the system, so that for example people can use any number of points from 0 to (say) 20 per story. In that way there will be enough natural variation to spread things out without forcing them apart (often). (Not exactly sure on that yet)

10 ▾

Bridge problem

What happened at the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

Nudge "Try tomorrow" ▫

I think this story is...

△ **Appropriate** helpful, friendly

△ ④ **Important** I'll never forget it

△ **Useful** for newcomers

△ **Useful** for understanding diversity

△ **Useful** for planning the future

Inappropriate rude, offensive ▽

Trivial Already forgotten ▽

Not useful for newcomers ▽

Not useful for understanding diversity ▽

Not useful for planning the future ▽

You can apply 16 more nudge points to this story. You have 59 nudge points left in total.

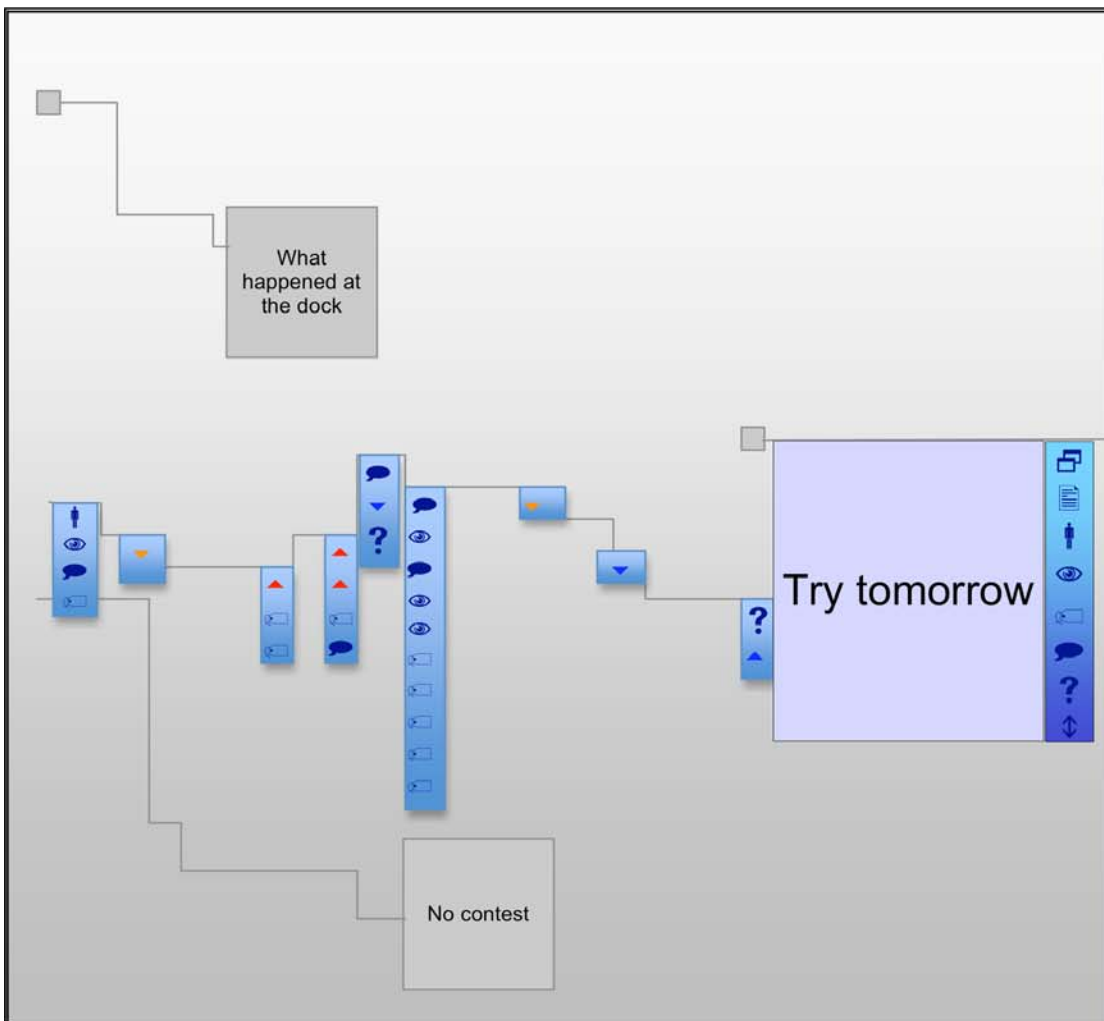Would you like to comment on the nudge(s) you are about to make?

I think this sort of thing has to be heard about!

[Nudge the story]　　[Cancel nudging this story]

5

Now ▾

Here the user has clicked on the ⇕ icon, then on the + at the end of the nudges list. In this window the user clicks the up and down arrows to nudge the story up or down for safety, importance, or utility for a purpose. The yellow highlight shows that the user is marking the story as (moderately) important to the community.

What
happened at
the dock

Try tomorrow

No contest

Today ▾

⌢ ✔ Traces
Links:
➡ Retold
→ Reminded
- - ➤ Related

Show on traces:
✔ Telling
✔ Interpreting
✔ Rating
✔ Tagging
✔ Commenting
    Reading

Here the user turns back on **traces** while the story is selected. Now the trace of the story shows all of the events surrounding the story. For this story we can see that there was little activity surrounding the story when it first appeared, but a pulse of attention took place a while later, then it was less annotated for a while and has just recently been picked up again (by this user).

The box at the beginning of the trace represents when the story was first entered into the system and contains the link to the teller's profile and all information entered by the teller. Other icons show things that happened:

👁 interpretations
▲ nudges
💬 comments
🔲 tags
? requests

The user can hover over any of these items in the same way they did for the same items in the story menu.

The menu and trace of a story show the same items but with different information about them highlighted: for the menu, categories and counts, and for the trace, the chronological progression of items. Each type of information is useful in different ways. For example, in the trace you can see when the different ratings took place, and that pattern may be useful by itself. Of course, if this is too much detail people can keep traces and even menus turned off.

Note that here the user has turned off showing readings of the story in traces. For stories they told, they might want to keep "show readings" turned on.
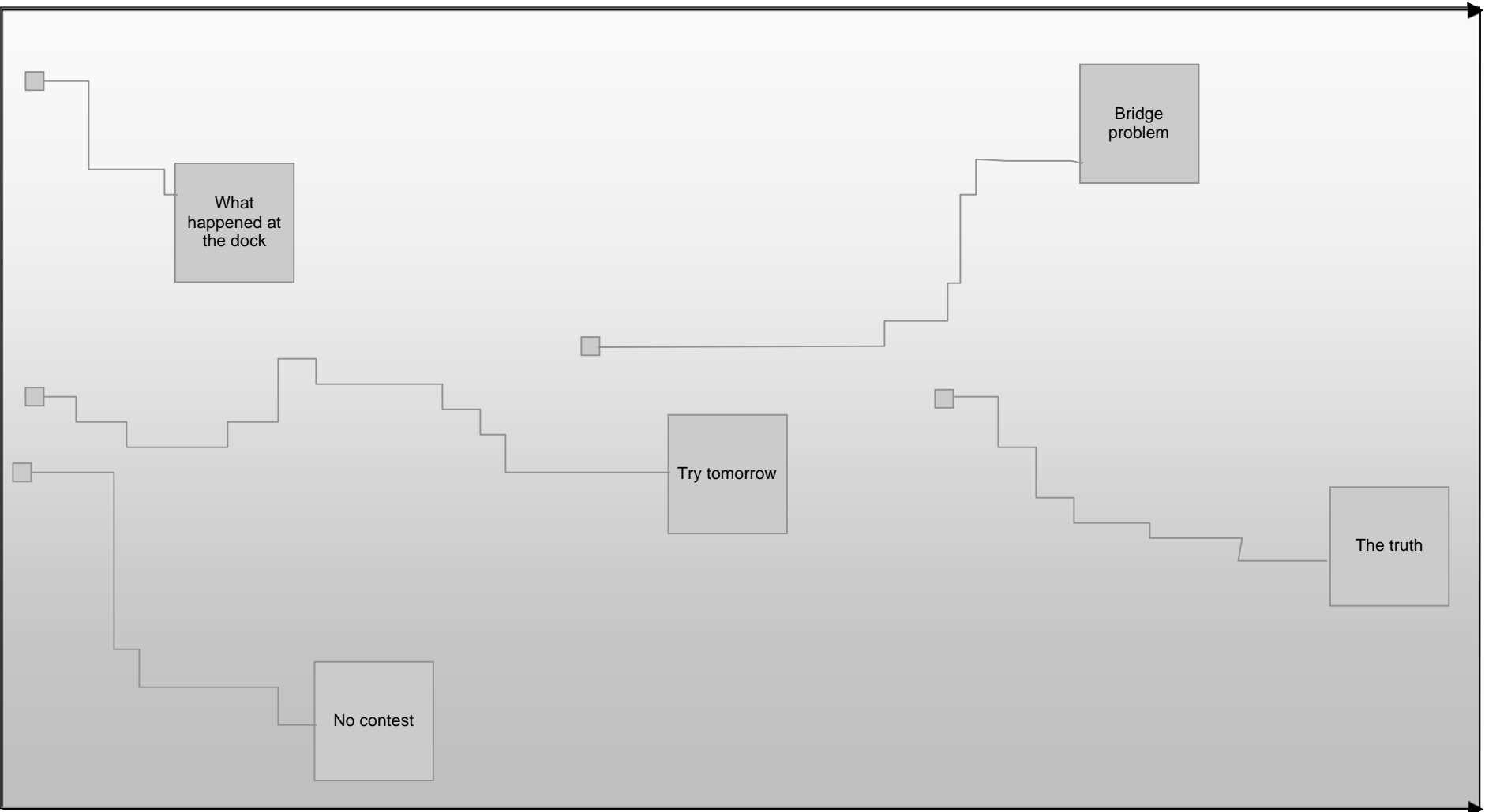
The way of dealing with scale in the trace as well as the menu is that if there are too many of anything to show in the space available, little numbers will take the place of loads of items. (Bit of hand waving there ;)

10 ▼

Bridge
problem

What
happened at
the dock

Try tomorrow

The truth

No contest

5 ▼

Today ▼   Now ▼

20

What
happened at
the dock

Try tomorrow

Here the user has put in a **query** to select only stories to which people answered "sad" or "angry" to the question "How do you feel about this story?"

Stories which do not match the story are still evident but are "in the background" or "ghosted" so that people can see differences between stories that match and stories that don't.
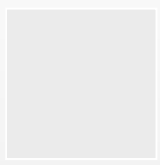
This is the complete list of things I'd like people to be able to do for queries.

Show only stories
   with these answers to these questions
   with these tags
   with these activities
     [retold, reminded, related, interpreted, commented on, nudged, read]
  [told, retold, reminded, related, interpreted, commented on, nudged, read]
       by [a person or people]
  with these similarities to one or more selected stories
   directly related
    [retold, reminded, related]
  with the same answers to these questions
  with the same
    [teller, retellers, reminders, relaters, commenters, nudgers, taggers, readers]
  with the most shared
    [words, tags, answers to questions]

5 ▼

Today ▼

Now ▼

Filter by question:
   How feel about ▼

and answer(s):
  ✓ Angry
  ✓ Sad
    Hopeful ▼

21

10 ▼

What
happened at
the dock

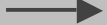Try tomorrow

5 ▼
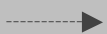
Today ▼   Now ▼

⌒ Traces
Links:
➡ Retold
→ Reminded
--► Related

Here the user turns off 2 traces.

10 ▼

Ways to
work with
governme
nt

What
happene
d at the
dock

Power
outages

Try
tomorro
w

No
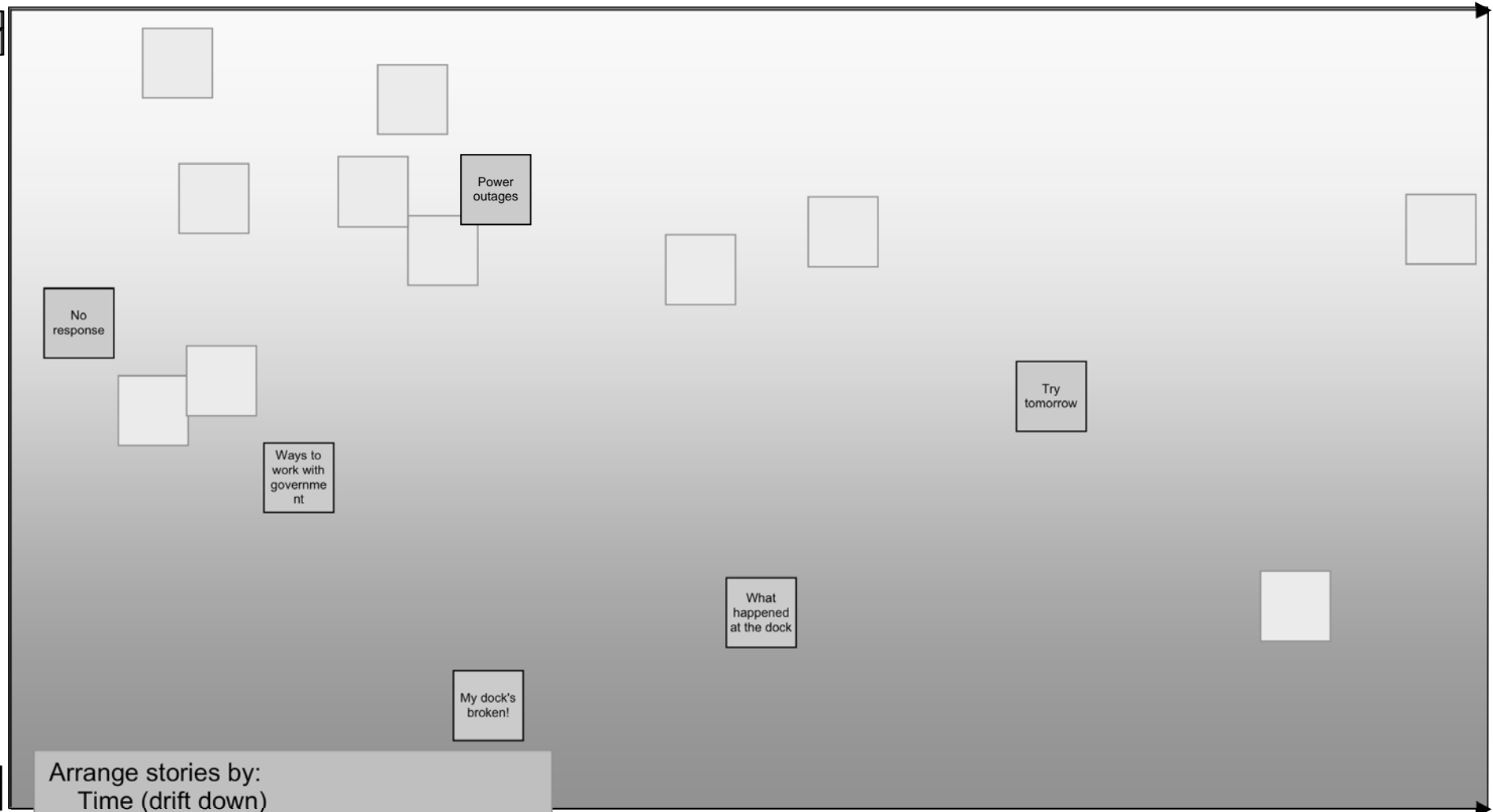response

My dock's
broken!

0 ▼
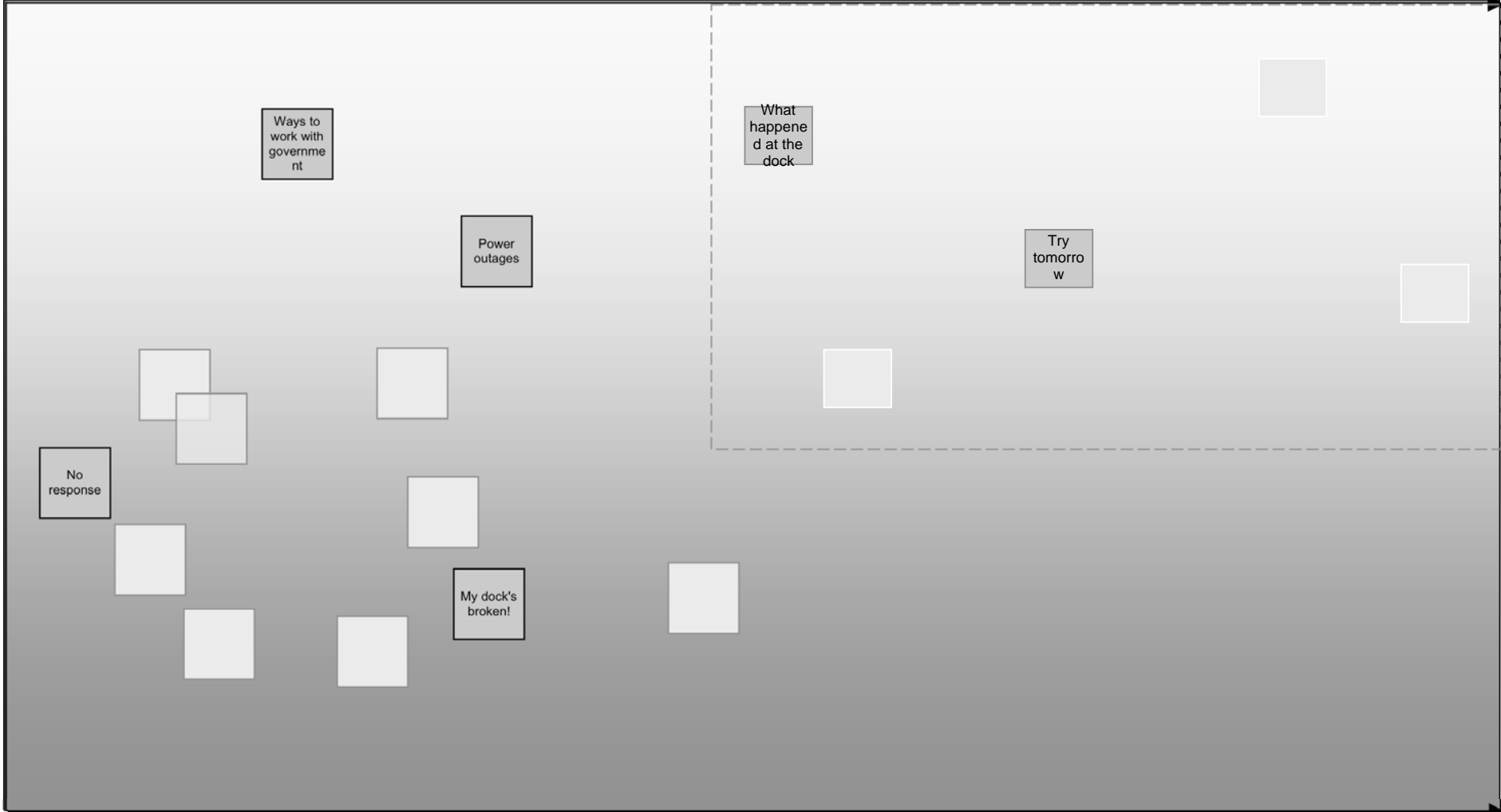
In the past 3 days ▼

Now ▼

Here the user **zooms out** the display by increasing the time frame and adding layers at the bottom to find more stories in their query. The dotted line shows the old zoom area. By setting the bottom layer to zero, the user prepares to "plumb" the whole story bank.

(Remember that zooming would look cooler than this.)

Also note that two of the (unselected) squares are on top of each other. One design issue is how to deal with stories taking up the same spaces. Two possible approaches are (a) to allow a certain amount of movement to avoid exact overlap, and (b) use a degree of translucence so that it is more clear when two stories overlap. In general however I expect the number of stories in any view to be somewhat limited (i.e., we are not going to be looking at 1000 stories in one smallish time frame here).

10 ▼

Power outages

No response

Try tomorrow

Ways to work with governme nt

What happened at the dock

My dock's broken!

0 ▼

Arrange stories by:
   Time (drift down)
   Activity:
      Interpreting
      Commenting
      Tagging
      Relating
      Reading
 ✔ Nudges:
      Appropriateness
      Importance
      Utility for:
         New members
      ✔ Understanding diversity
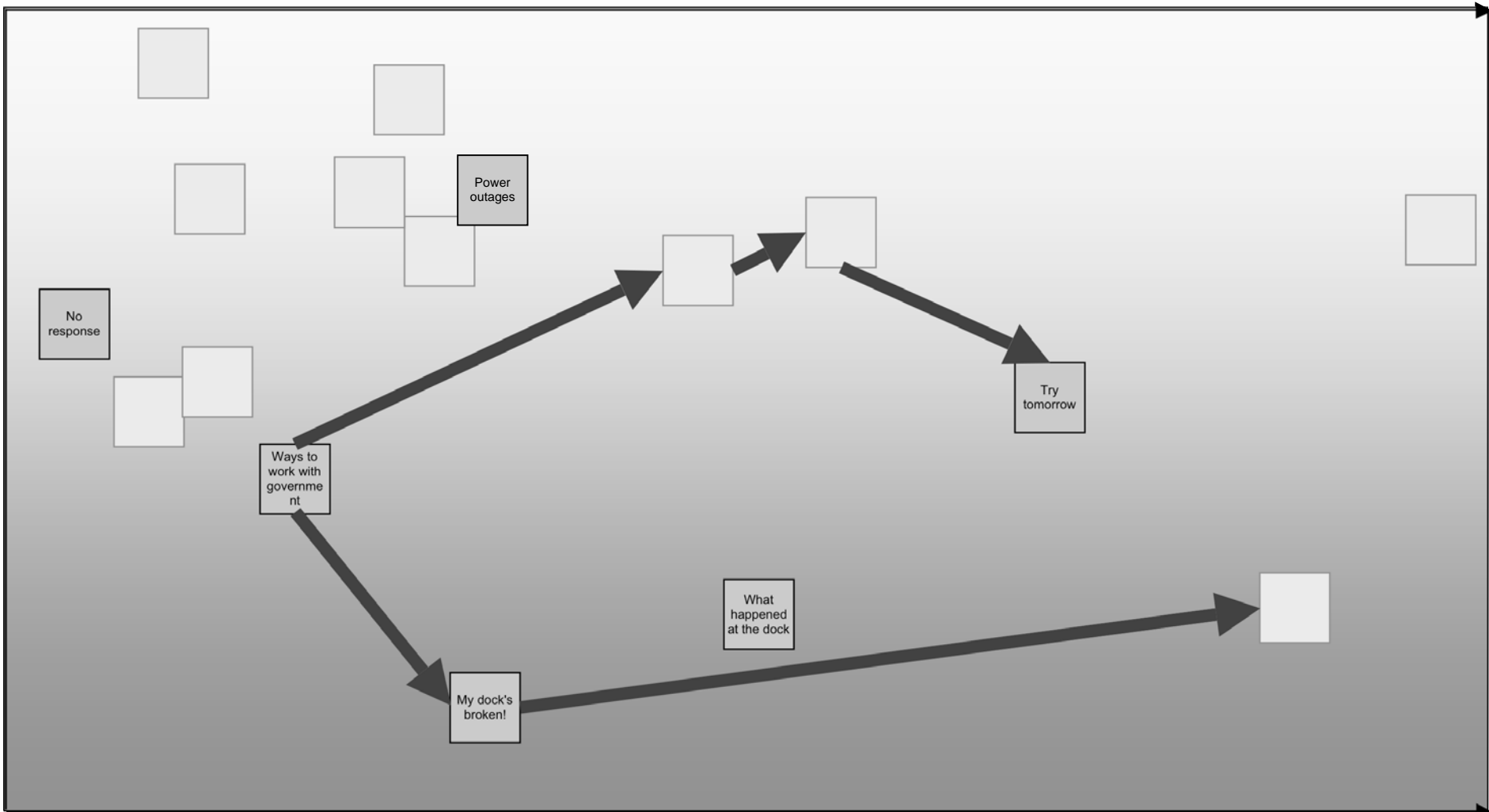   Planning for the future
Answers to questions

Now ▼

Here the user changes the method used to **arrange** stories into the vertical space. Now only utility recommendations are being considered, and only for the purpose of "understanding diversity." The stories change positions accordingly.

When the user sets up the display this way, they are using it more for **directed pattern detection** than for general environmental awareness, or seeing "what's up" in the community. It should be easy to switch between these ways of looking at the stories depending on the needs of the moment. But this is a bit of a power-user function. Many people will never change the display from the default, so it should be something that seems to work for most people, or it may be set at the community level.

10

0

In the past 3 days ▼

Now ▼

Power outages

No response

Ways to work with government

Try tomorrow

What happened at the dock

My dock's broken!

Traces
Links:
✓ Retold
Reminded
Related

Here the user turns only retold links on. Two **retelling paths** (people telling different stories about the same events) are visible. Some of the stories are angry or sad, and some aren't. The user might then go on to examine why the interpreters of the stories in those paths ranged in their emotional responses. They might also want to look at differences between the two paths.

This is as far as we will go in visualizing Rakontu at this stage. There will of course be other screens - for entering stories, for example - but they will not be graphical and so will be more standard and need not be drawn out in detail.

The last few pages of this slide set will venture past this simple view into things that lie beyond .....

There are four other types of **article** the Rakontu system will support besides told stories. Some are groupings of stories and some are not. Like stories, all of these can have interpretations, comments, tags, and nudges, and all can be viewed in the GUI.

⊞ Why a peak in May?

A **pattern** is a saved set of viewing parameters for the graphical screen (or other various viewers that could emerge), including what stories are selected. There is also a screenshot saved for quick viewing. The interpretation of a pattern contains three parts:
  an observation (what you can see),
  an explanation (what it means) and
  an optional implication (what could/should be done about it).

Because people can comment on, tag, and provide multiple intepretations, the pattern can have a life of its own in the community.

🏛Top ten stories for newcomers

A **construct** is something people built together in a narrative exercise. It could be a top-ten stories list (with links to the stories), a constructed story, a set of emergent constructs, a timeline, and so on. People will build these things using some kind of graphical interface (massive hand waving...)

👂 Do you remember the old pier?

An **invitation** is a request to tell stories. People might create these out of curiosity or the need to reminisce, or because they need stories for some project. As with all other objects these can be nudged and can fall down into forgetfulness over time or for a reason.
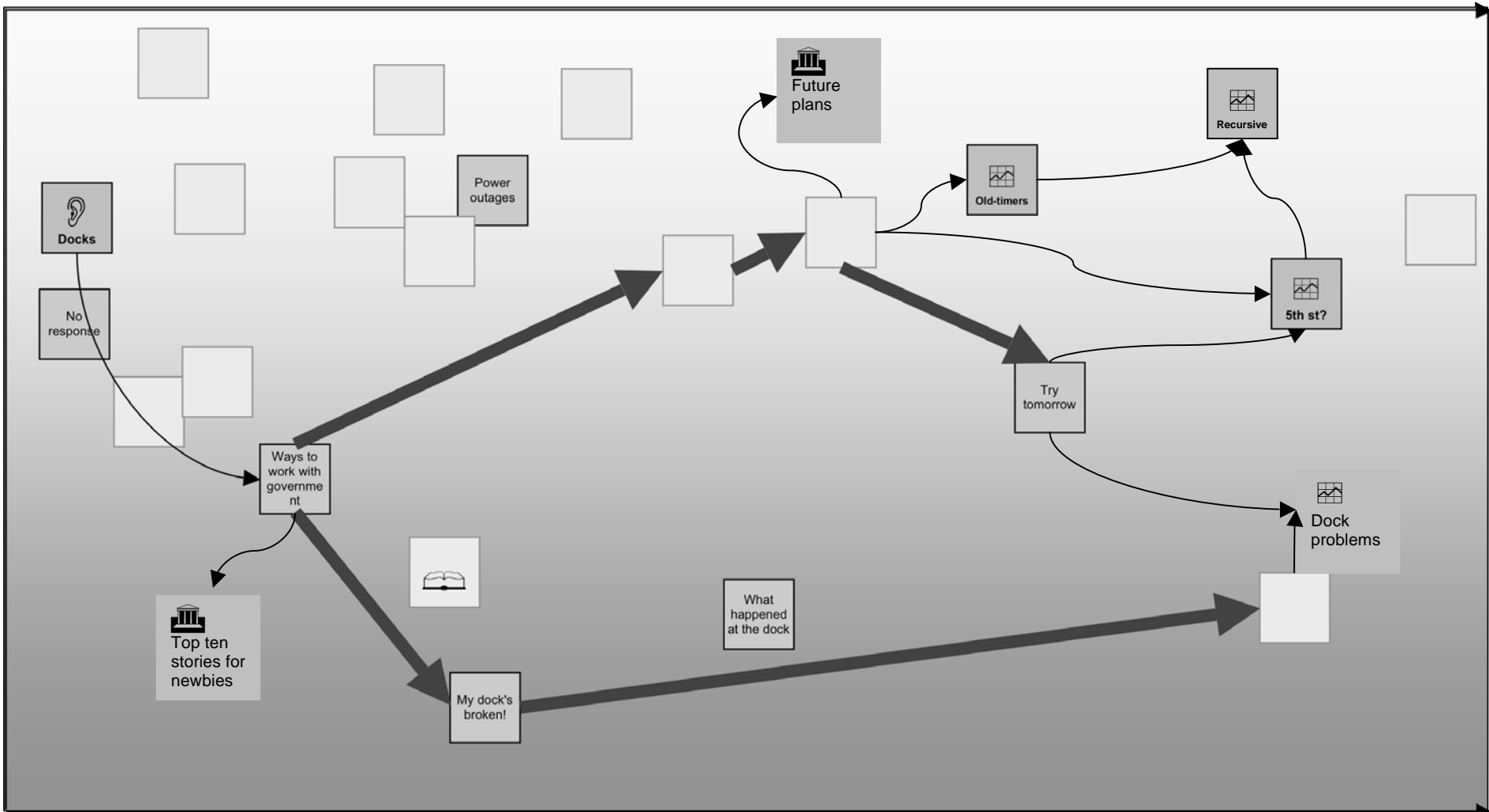
📖Pictures of the town over the past century

A **resource** is a non-story article. These will be things that are helpful information but not stories. Some could be help resources for using the system (like tutorials), and some will be about the community or group.

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Docks

No response

Power outages

Future plans

Recursive

Old-timers

5th st?

Try tomorrow

Ways to work with government

Dock problems

Top ten stories for newbies

What happened at the dock

My dock's broken!

In the past 3 days ▼

Now ▼

Traces
Links:
✓ Retold
Reminded
Related
✓ Included

Show:
✓ Stories
✓ Patterns
✓ Constructs
✓ Invitations
✓ Resources

You can picture **patterns**, **constructs**, **invitations** and **resources** floating in the space along with **stories** and being affected by the same forces that nudge things up and down. (Excuse these crude icons.)

If you add one more type of link - **inclusion** - you can link these other **articles** to stories, to see where they came from and how they were used. Of course, patterns could include patterns and all that recursive sort of thing. These sorts of meta-patterns would be power-user elements, for use mainly by people in helper roles, and regular users might not see them often, or at all.

A note about complexity: *I know it's way too complex and hard to understand.*

The reason to get this out now, before I've started to build the software, is to try and get people to help me (us) think about the complexity along with the goals and ideas, to see how things can be slimmed down, where they should be, and what shouldn't be lost.

There are some hard choices to be made......

Other things not covered in this GUI design document (but see the architecture and implementation plan documents as well):

Question-building rule system
Advanced search
Full exercise support (construct creation)
Sharing stories with other communities
Shared browsing

THANKS for reading this! Please send feedback!

--- Cynthia Kurtz