SIGGRAPH Asia 2021 – Course Notes

What We Talk About, When We Talk About Story

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Abstract

Story (content) is not just the domain of directors and producers… anymore. Today, it is as important for technical directors, animators, VFX creators and interactive designers whose work is essential in making "*the story"* come to life. This information is particularly useful when communicating with screenwriters, directors, and producers. This course answers the question, "What is Story?" (and you don't even have to take a course in screenwriting). Knowing the basics of story enables the crew to become collaborators with the producer and director. A director may talk about their story goals; and the crew will know what specific story benchmarks they are trying to meet. This information builds from a story being more than "a sequence of events (acts) but can become a dramatic story that that builds from setup through resolution.

Having an understanding of story structure allows one to understand a story's elements in context (i.e., theme, character, setting, conflict etc.) and their relationship to classic story structure (i.e., setup, inciting incident, rising action, climax, resolution, etc.). This information is for all whose work makes the story better, but their job is not creating the story. The following course notes have been adapted from *Story Structure and Development: A Guide for Animators, VFX Artists, Game Designers, and Virtual Reality Creators*. CRC Publishers, a division of Taylor and Francis. Available on Amazon.

About the Presenter

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1. What is a Dramatic Story?

Every day we tell each other stories, but these are not the dramatic stories we see in the movies or encounter in interactive games. Dramatic stories are more than *what*-is-happening; they are about the "why" what-is-happening. The dictionary definition of a story is *a "sequence of events*." Yes, dramatic stories are still a sequence of events, but the fundamental difference is that they are a sequence of *"connected"* events. Many years ago, E. M. Forster (Figure 1.1) pointed out that a sequence-of-events story is "*the king died, and then the queen died*," but a dramatic story is "*the king died and then the queen died of grief*."[1] The emphasis changes from *"what"* happened to *"the why"* it happened.

Figure 1.1
E. M. Forester.

Stories not only connect audiences to what individuals think but also to what cultures value. The critical questions in a dramatic story are: *What* do people want? *Why* do they want it? *How* do they go about getting it? *What* stops them? What are the consequences?[2] When we talk about dramatic stories, this is what we are referring to. You could define dramatic stories as a main character, who goes after something, but the journey gets increasingly difficult (conflict), and by the end of the story, they are changed and see the world differently.

Figure 1.2
Mythology

The *Why* underscores how we use story to understand life; why things work the way they do. Stories are the devices we use in our search for meaning in life… to make sense of why we are alive. They give us a perspective on the priorities in our lives. For generations, cultures have proposed answers to these questions through myths (Figure 1.2): Greek plays, Shakespearean plays, Chinese proverbs, folk tales, and interpreted dreams.[3] Today, we get this information through novels, movies, animation, and interactive media.

Joseph Campbell, the originator of the *Hero's Journey* story structure, emphasized that audiences have evolved from searching for clues to the meaning of life and now seek *the experience of being alive* through stories.[4] We repeatedly return to our favorite movies for that "experience." Successful stories engage audiences emotionally by linking the external action in the story to the internal emotions of the characters. When it works well, a viewer's emotions are connected with the main character's emotions, triggering identification with the story. (Figure 1.3)

We are trying to find what we hope the audience will feel while watching this movie. Every other department is on board… the environment, the coloring, the lighting, the animation, to make the strongest possible statement; that when people are in a theatre they are going to… Wow, this is something special, this is something that affected me.

Figure 1.3
Joe Ranft, Head of Story, Pixar

When Linda Seger (author, *Making a Good Script Great*) (Figure 1.4) asks the question: *What is a story?* she says that it sounds like an obvious question, but states that many films, animations, and games are released every year, where there is not a story, but episodes. She defines "episodes" as the daily mundane events in our lives. The difference is that *episodes* are how we live most of our lives; we get up, go to work, see friends, go to lunch, but none of these events are intrinsically linked to each other[5] as they are within a dramatic story. Dramatic stories are when there is a change in these daily events that take our lives in a different direction.

Figure 1.4
Linda Seger

Dramatic stories follow the structure of—*connected actions, with conflict that intensifies,* which *force difficult choices* with *consequences.* Audiences anticipate the increasing conflict to force a *crisis,* which leads to a *climax,* with a *surprise* along the way that the audience did not anticipate, leading to a *resolution* (which gives meaning to the story), and in the end the character is *changed*. These are the universal components of a dramatic story today.

2. Plot… What is it?

What is Plot? Plot is the arrangement of the story elements (i.e., character, setting, and theme); *what* happens and *when* it happens. It is the sequence of which events come before (or after) other events, resulting in *increasing conflict*, leading to a *climax*, producing a *particular ending* to the story. In *The Three Little Pigs*, the order of the houses getting blown down, changing the idea in the telling of the story.

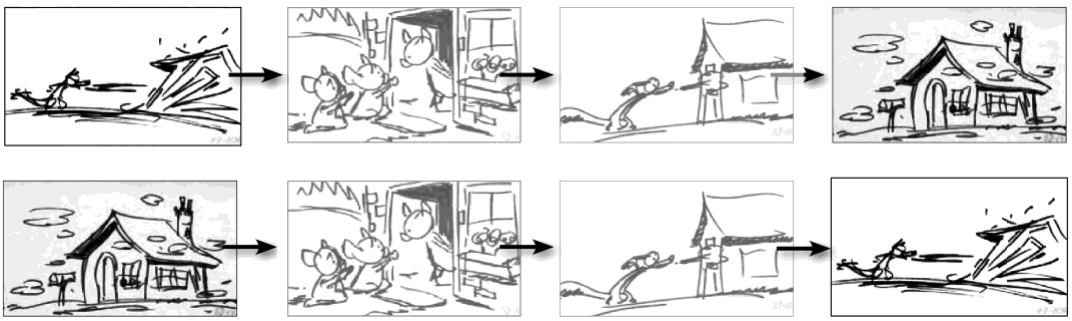

Figure 1.5
Three Little Pigs by Francis Glebas, *Directing the Story*.

Plot is to story as composition is to art and music. The work of story is not just selecting the correct story elements. The order you put them in is as important as what is selected. FYI, the concepts of story and plot are often used interchangeably... *they are not the same thing*.

The more familiar an audience is with a particular *plot structure* (i.e., mystery, horror, comedy, etc.) the faster an audience can understand what is happening in the story. A plot connects the events in a story, to not only grab an audience/ player's interest, but also to keep them interested in what is going to happen next. This arrangement of events uses plot devices such as suspense, surprise, coincidences, reversals, emotional moments, etc. Alfred Hitchcock (Figure 1.6) revealed that the difference between *suspense* versus *shock/surprise* depends on what the audience knows ahead of time. In a scene where a bomb has been planted, the most important story decision is whether or not the *audience knows* about the bomb *before it goes off* (15 minutes of suspense) or *after it goes off* (5 seconds of surprise).[6] Such plot devices determine the level of emotional engagement of the viewer/ player (Figure 1.7).

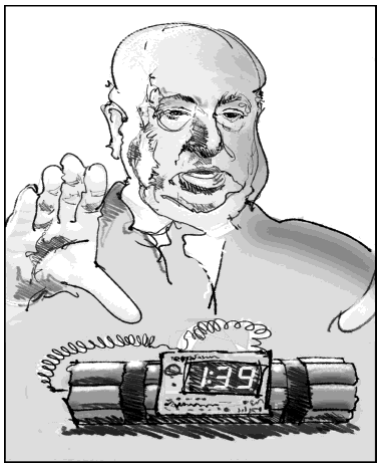

Figure 1.6
Alfred Hitchcock

What the plot organizes (puts in a specific order) are the story elements (character, setting, goal, theme, and obstacles). In Gladiator, the story elements are (Figure 1.8):

- ***Character***—*who* the audience identifies with—Maximus.
- ***World/Setting***—*where*, ancient Rome, its territories, and the Roman Coliseum.
- ***Goal***—*what* the main character wants— revenge, to kill the emperor.
- ***Theme***—*why*—to be with his family. This is the meaning of the story. The theme is realized at the climax as a result of the choices the character makes.
- ***Conflict/Obstacle***—*the things that prevent* the character from reaching their goal—he is injured, becomes a slave, the guards protect the emperor.
- ***Change***—the main character goes through or they bring to the world around them. Maximus frees Rome from the emperor's tyranny, frees his fellow slaves, joins his family.

Plot is the writer's choice of events and their design in time.[7]

Figure 1.7
Robert McKee

Figure 1.8
Story elements in *Gladiator*

Paradoxically, if the plot is well done, it will not be remembered. What is remembered are the *story* elements of characters and situation. Successful storytelling is when the audience is so engrossed with the story—nothing else is noticed. The audience is unaware of how the story is being told. Similar to VFX (visual effects); when VFX is done really well, it is invisible.

3. Three Act Structure

The classic plot structure is three acts; corresponding to 1. Setup, 2. Increasing Conflict, and 3. Resolution. Even something as short as a scene, or interactive game level, has a similar 3-part structure (Figure 1.9):

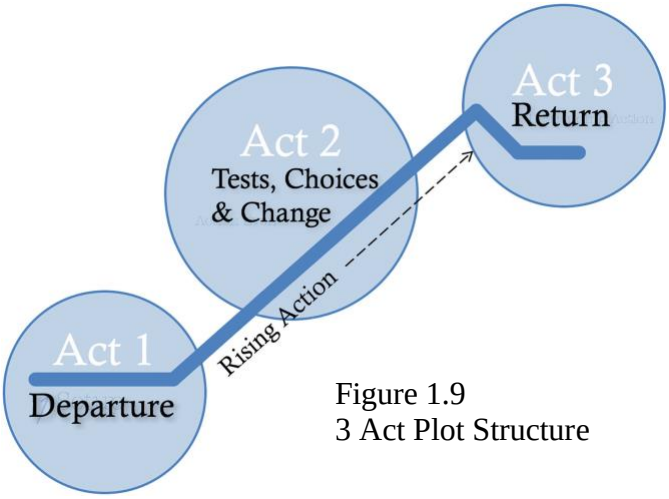

Figure 1.9
3 Act Plot Structure

Act 1—*the setup* introduces the characters and the rules of the world. The audience/player learns where the story takes place (the setting), what the main character wants (motivation), and the dramatic question that the audience can relate to (which is what the story is really about. Act 1 contains only a minimum amount of information. Just enough to start the story for the viewer.

Act 2—*Increasing Conflict* forces the main character to confront obstacles that stand between them and what they want, their goal. The conflicts continue to build until the final crisis that has to be resolved. This act is where the majority of the conflict takes place.

Act 3—*Resolution, which* follows the Climax as the story transitions to Act 3. Here, the conflict is resolved, the big questions are answered, and a new status quo is established. It is the shortest act, where it is highly desirable to have a resolution, which gives the story its meaning.

Each act has a different purpose, but its purpose can vary depending on the author's point of view. (Figure 1.10):

- Conflict/crisis, climax, and resolution[8]
- Departure, tests/choices/change, and return [9]
- Setup, confrontation, and resolution [10]

Aristotle[12] many years ago (352 BC) originally defined plot as having beginning, middle, and end. Today, stories still have a beginning, middle, and end… just not necessarily in that order. The traditional link between beginning, middle, end, and the 3-act structure has been decoupled.

Ridley Scott, Director of *The Martian* (referring to the screen-play for *Gladiator*) "… *I needed all this information converted into a good 3-Act play… drama*."[11]

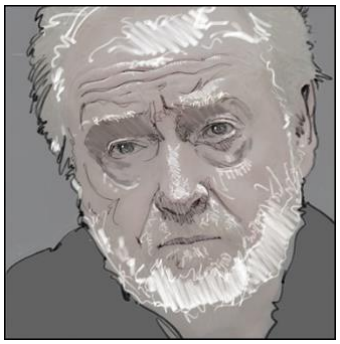

Figure 1.10
Ridley Scott

This can be seen in recent films such as *Pulp Fiction* and *Live, Die, Repeat,* which do not follow the traditional, linear order of beginning, middle, and end. This is possible because viewers have seen so many stories, they intuitively understand the 3-act structure. Even when a story is not presented in a linear order, audiences assemble a 3-act story sequence in their mind. This enhanced capability of the viewer/player permits game designers to break story elements into narrative blocks. These blocks can then be distributed across a variety of sequences, with the player piecing together the narrative (from the blocks) as they play.

Figure 1.11
Director, Christopher Nolan

Screen media (i.e., video games, VR, film, and animation) is expanding this use of narrative blocks. Narrative blocks can be seen as an extension of the axiom that *"All stories start in the Middle*." Action movies (i.e., *James Bond*, *Mission Impossible*, Christopher Nolan films [Figure 1.11]) always start their stories in the *middle* of the action. Act 1 opens in the middle of a conflict, which began before the story opened. Although the viewer did not see that beginning action, they use their innate story knowledge to puzzle their way through the information and put the pieces together. This innate capability has permitted directors to shift narrative information from a traditional sequence (i.e., beginning, middle, and end) to dispersing these narrative elements throughout the plot structure

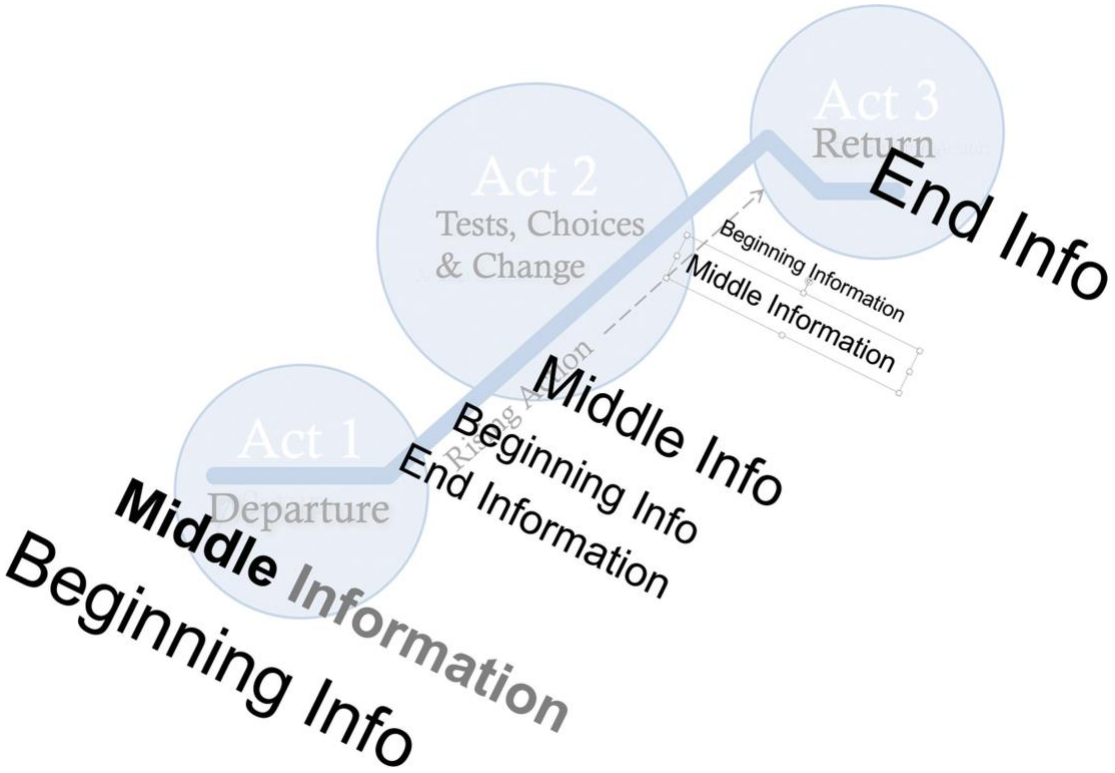

Figure 1.12
Narrative elements distributed throughout the plot.

4. Plot Structure: The Hero's Journey

There are various plots that lay out the basic structure of a dramatic story. One of the more popular today is the Hero's Journey[13] credited to Joseph Campbell (Figure 1.13). This structure has become one of the more familiar structures for action movies, and first-person shooter (FPS) games today (*Mission Impossible, Star Wars, Battlefield).*

Figure 1.13
Joseph Campbell, author *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Viewers see it so often they now expect it. But at the same time, they want to see it in fresh configurations (i.e. *Avatar*, *Suicide Squad*, *Call of Duty*). Ironically, the Hero's Journey is based on some of the earliest cultural stories that have been passed down, while at the same time being one of the more recent story structures to have emerged. It heavily influenced the plot for *Star Wars,* which has a direct correspondence with the Hero's Journey structure (see Figure 1.14).

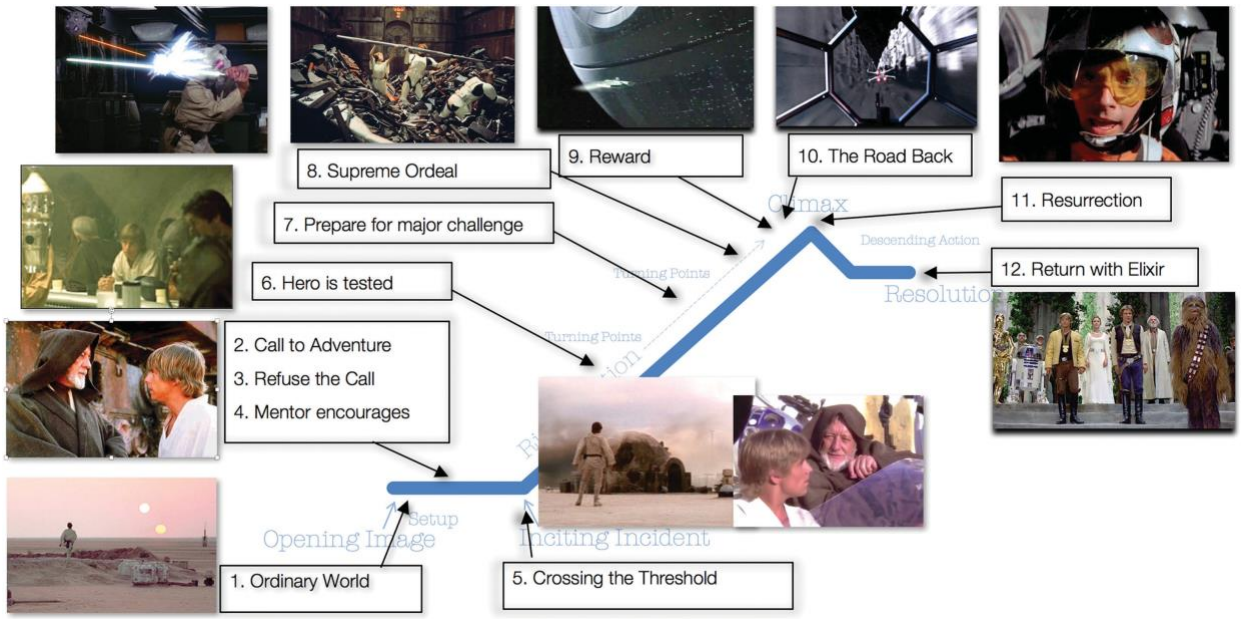

Figure 1.14
Analysis of *Star Wars* as the Hero's Journey.

This structure is derived from Joseph Campbell's research on common narrative patterns in myths handed down from generation to generation. Campbell detected that the principal myths from numerous cultures around the world share a fundamental structure; the *monomyth*[13] (one great story). Campbell summarized this structure as…

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered, and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.[14]

Most people want to be a hero, so they readily identify with the hero motif. With the increased popularity of this structure, it is now common to refer to the main character as the *hero*. The Hero's Journey is made up of a number of stages that the main character goes through in a story.[14] Joseph Campbell broke it down into 12 stages. The Hero's Journey pattern of stages is familiar in many of the world's spiritual narratives (i.e., Buddha and Jesus), which in turn influenced *The Matrix* (see Figure 1.15).

Do movies and games have these all these stages? No, but all dramatic stories have some of them, in one form or another. Christopher Vogler, in *the Writer's Journey*, consolidated them into 12 stages for the film industry. He stressed that "*the order of the stages… is only one of many possible variations. The stages can be deleted, added to, and drastically shuffled without losing any of their power."*[15] Warning: there are examples where films tried to follow this structure as a template, only to come to ruin (i.e., *Delgo: A Hero's Journey*). This is a guide, not a formula.

The Hero's Journey continues to evolve across cultures and with the times we live in. Story theorists who have integrated the stages of the Hero's Journey into their work include (8-point arc [Watts][16], 22 steps [Truby][17], and 31 functions [Propp][18]). Which stages to consider in your story depend on the content and story you want to tell. These stages provide familiar points of reference that a viewer uses to track where they are in the story and gain insights into the character's motivation as well as enhancing the entertainment through anticipation.

Figure 1.15
Analysis of Hero's Journey in *The Matrix*.

5. Plot Structures: The Short

While the Hero's Journey works well for large, epic stories, there are other plot structures that are better adapted for short stories. These structures differ from the Hero's Journey in that they have a fewer number of stages and use terminology that is easier to understand. These stages can serve as a checklist to be considered.

It is important that each person select (and assemble), their own set of plot stages that match their sensibilities and media (i.e., animation, film, games, VR, etc.). For each stage has its strengths as well as its tradeoffs. Nigel Watts proposes that all classic plots pass through eight stages (Figure 1.16)[19]—similar to the Hero's Journey. Stories have expected turning points: the beginning of a story that sets up the basic problem (everyday life and trigger), the middle that build the story's rising conflict (quest), and the end that provides a resolution (surprise, critical choice, reversal, climax, and resolution [the meaning]).

1. Stasis (everyday life)
2. Trigger (inciting incident)
3. Quest (middle)
4. Surprise (obstacles)
5. Critical choice (leading to crisis)
6. Climax (climax)
7. Reversal (change of status quo)
8. Resolution (change is visible)

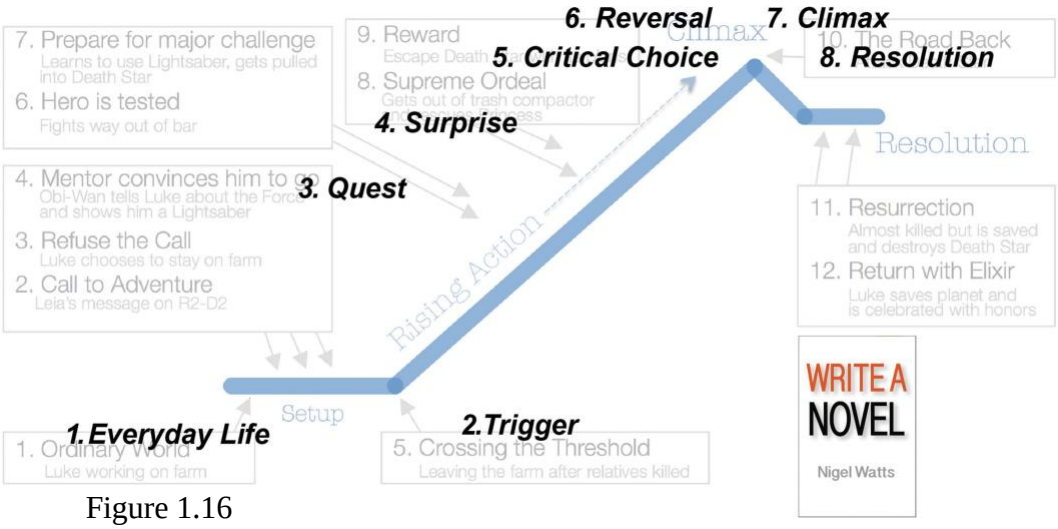

Figure 1.16
8-point arc.

A focused 8-point structure was proposed by Karen Sullivan in her book *Ideas for the Animated Short* (Figure 1.17).[20] This structure echoes the stages of the Hero's Journey but is a more useful plot structure adapted for animated shorts (under 5 minutes). This structure can be seen in such successful Pixar shorts as *Presto*, *Luxo Jr.*, and *For the Birds* (additional examples link) Short stories work best when limited to no more than two primary characters, one setting, and one theme (i.e., Looney Tunes [Bugs Bunny]). There is limited time to establish what a character wants and the obstacle(s) that are preventing the character from getting what they want. Shorts are more successful when stories are direct, simple, and have an economy of structure and plot (Figure 1.18).

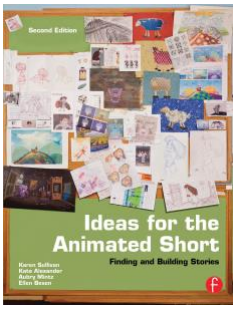

Figure 1.17

Ideas for the Animated Short Plot Structure

1. A character wants something badly
2. Something happens that moves the character to action
3. The character meets with conflict
4. Things gets worse until the character is in crisis
5. Almost all is lost
6. Lesson is learned
7. Hard choice must be made
8. Success

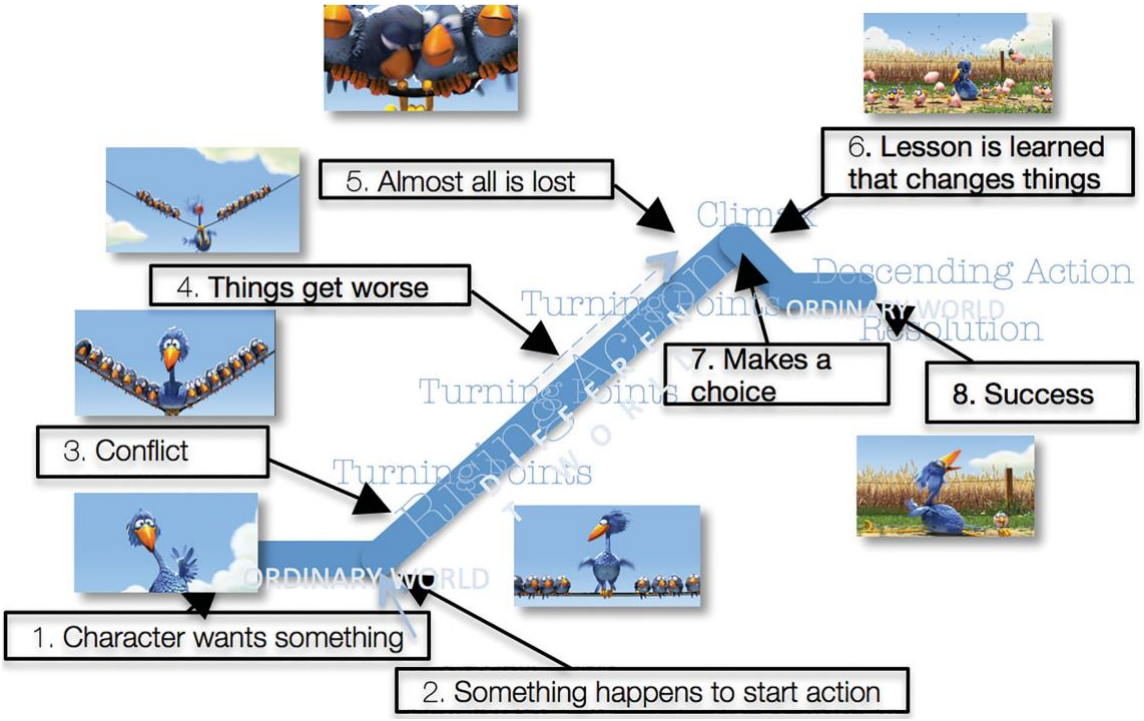

Figure 1.18
For the Birds and Sullivan's 8-point structure

6. Plot Structure Comparisons

Plot structure has evolved into two major categories: *Hero's Journey* and an *(updated) Aristotelian* paradigm. Hero's Journey is today's most well-known story structure based on Joseph Campbell's research, which is found in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* on the commonalities between narratives found in myths from around the world.[21] (Figure 1.19).

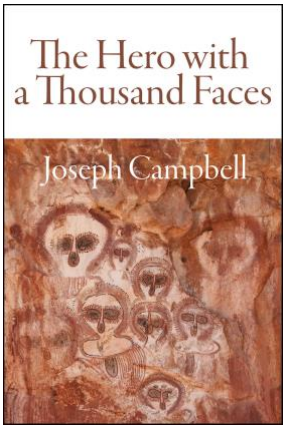

Figure 1.18
The Hero with a Thousand Faces

Popular story theorists that ascribe to the Hero's Journey structure include Christopher Vogler[22] and John Truby[23] (Figure 1.20). This approach took off when Vogler's 7-page summary, written when he worked at Disney, was distributed and embraced by the Hollywood studios in the 1990s. Vogler expanded his summary into the definitive book— *The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*.

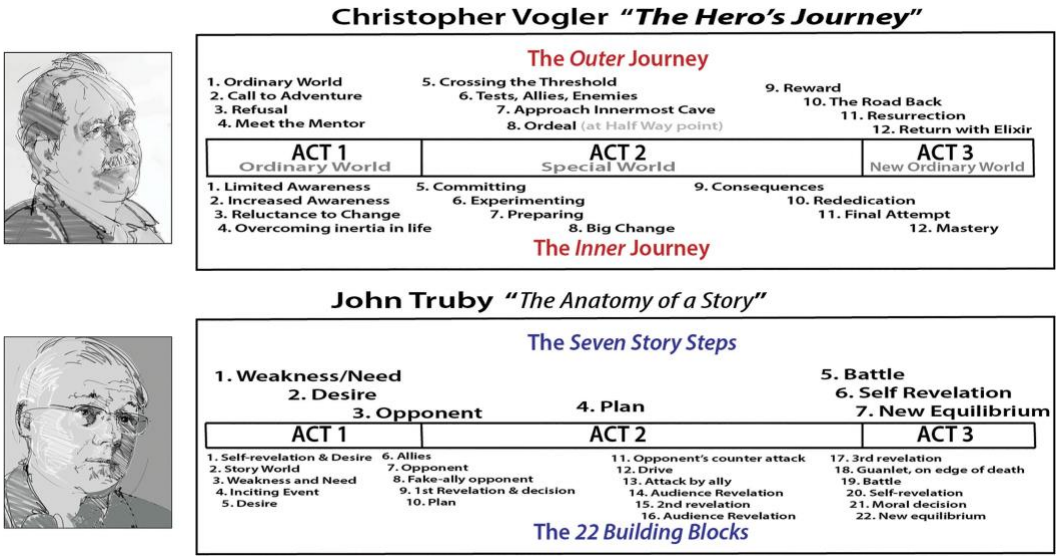

Figure 1.19
Hero's Journey story theorists

The updated-Aristotelian plot approach is built on Aristotle's story theories, *Poetics*, derived from the structure of Greek plays in 300 BC[24] (Figure 1.20). This approach has not only been time tested but also enhanced with new emphases on characters and their free will. Originally, Aristotle put the emphasis on *what* happens as opposed to today's audiences wanting to more about the *why.*

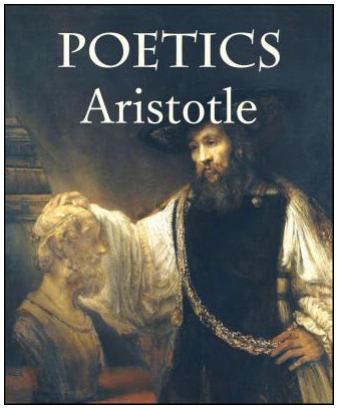

Figure 1.20
Poetics by Aristotle (c. 335 BC)

The story theorists that ascribe to the updated-Aristotelian plot structure include Syd Field[25], Michael Hauge[26], Robert McKee[27], and Linda Seger[28] (Figure 1.21). Their approaches codify commonalities of Aristotle's story in screen media. Syd Field was the first to lay out the contemporary story concepts for film writers in his 1979 book *Screenplay*. Since that time, the Aristotelian structure has been further expanded by McKee (*Story, Principles of Screenwriting*). Pixar's writers and directors credit their attendance at McKee's *Story Seminar* as instrumental in their structuring of *Toy Story*[29].

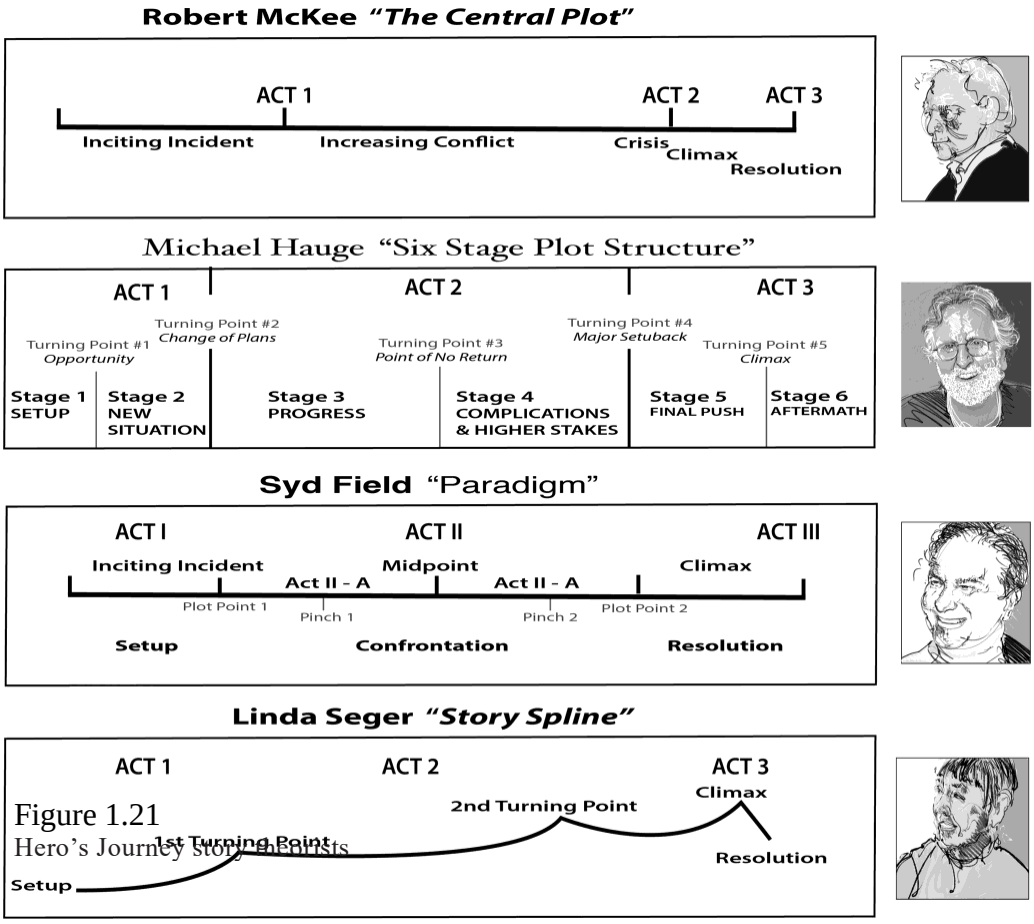

Figure 1.21
Hero's Journey story theorists

Figure 1.21
Aristotelian story theorists

7. Plot Structure Commonalities

Ironically, though each story theorist has their own terminology, their structures include similar plot components (Figure 1.22).

The most common plot patterns in the 3-act structure:

1. Act 1—story *setup, ordinary world, everyday life* (background information).
2. Act 2—increasing conflict: *complications, higher stakes, supreme ordeal, quest, confrontation.*
3. Act 3—*resolution, aftermath, realization, resurrection.*
4. Within Act 1 (often near the end), there is a significant event: *inciting incident, catalyst, trigger, cross the threshold* where the story really starts.
5. End of Act 1 moves the character to take action (start the quest), which signals transition into Act 2. This transition into Act 2 involves a location change… with the hero crossing into a new world.
6. Act 2 shows the conflict intensifying. Things increasingly get worse with a *reversal* (of fortune).
7. Story theories split 50/50 between Act 2 as one act, versus Act 2 divided into

Act 2A and 2B, with a distinct midpoint.

8. Midpoints have a variety of characteristics: point of no return, conflict becomes personal, rite of passage, lovers or buddies commit to each other, next stage of growth, reveal, ticking clock to increase tension.
9. Act 2 results in a *crisis* that leads to the *climax*.
10. Act 3 has a climax with a turning point and twist.
11. There is an ending that gives meaning to the story.

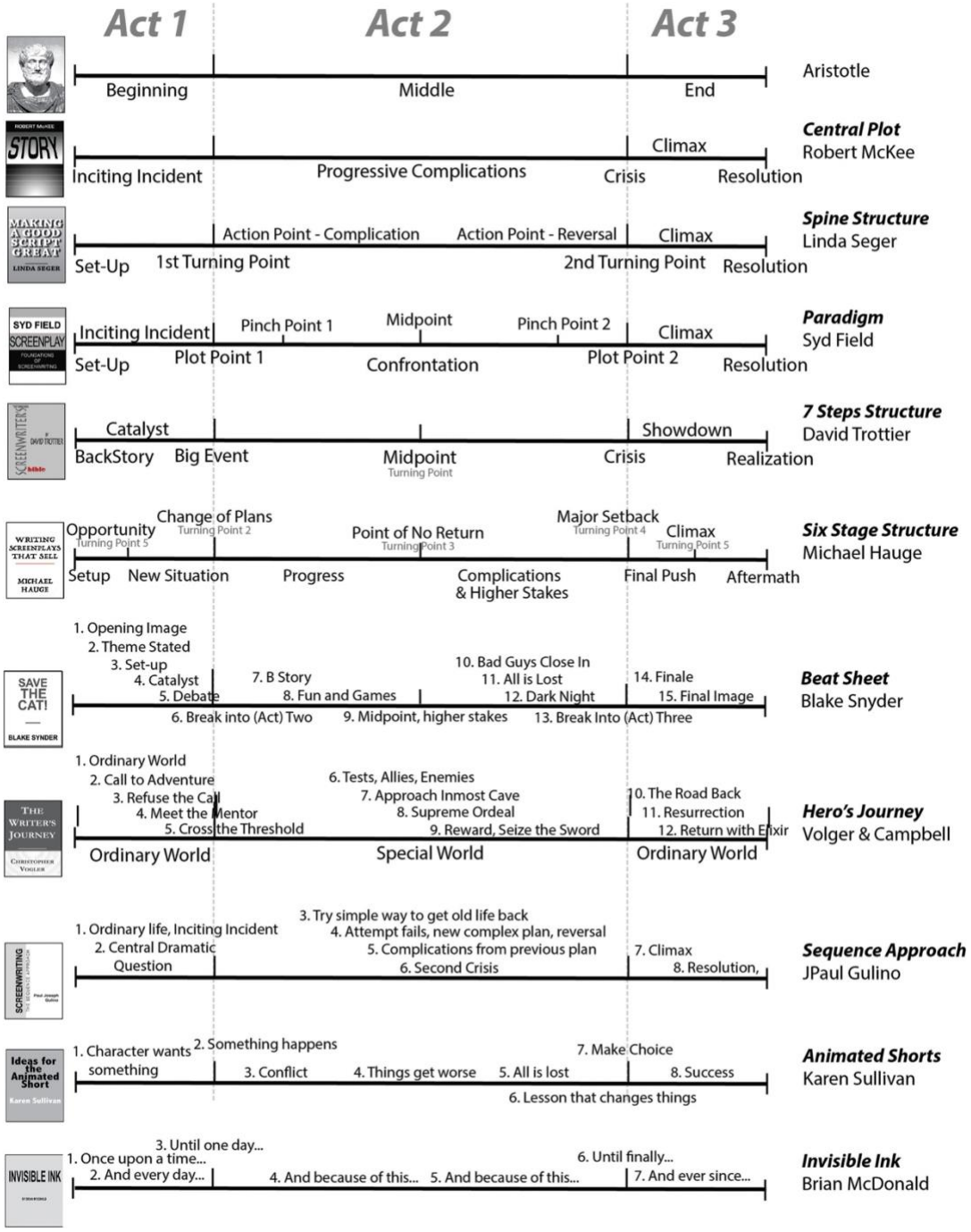

Figure 1.22 A comparison of the most common structures

In comparing story structures, the terminology may vary, but those variations are far more idiosyncratic. The structures all have roughly the same story points in common. However, while there is a consensus on these major points, there are distinct differences in how and where the structures place the emphasis. These structures might be most useful as a story *editing* tool in the rewriting phase.

8. What to do next?

These notes are just a sampling of story components. When we start breaking down the larger structures, we find additional components. For example, in Act 1, there are different types of setup, opening images set the stage, exposition gives information, Inciting Incident gets things started, establishing what is at stake, introducing the dramatic story question... In Act 2, there are different middle structures to choose from, several types of conflict, "increasing" conflict that needs to be structured, specific turning points/reversals, establishing clear cause & effects leading to crises… In Act 3, types of endings (i.e. up, down, mixture), the purpose of the climax, resolution, meaning at the end of the story... We have not even introduced Story Elements – premise, theme, setting… or Story Tools – scene, narrative questions, using comedy, surprise versus suspense, subplot, foreshadowing...

As you can see, there are a number of components to story, and we have not even covered Character or Storytelling, which are sections all by themselves. There are excellent sources for additional insights in Story. These include the "audiobook" of Robert McKee's *Story* (the audio CDs can also be found in your library). The actual book is a bit more demanding to read but I find his audio fantastic. There is also a book, with a terrible title, *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey into Story* by John Yorke that covers story well. These course notes are an adaptation from *Story Structure and Development: A Guide for Animators, VFX artists, Game Designers, and VR*. (Figure 1.22) The layout of the actual book emulates artists books with a different story concept every 2 pages. The kindle version does not maintain the layout as a reference book; thus, I recommend the physical book, which permits readers to access the specific information they are most interested in, as needed.

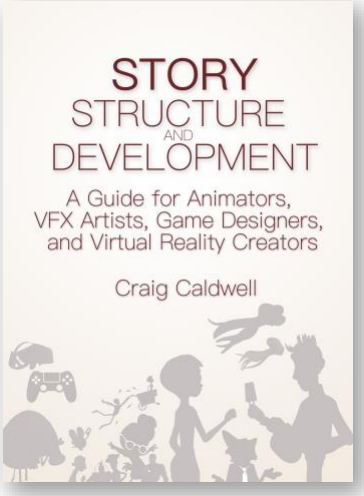

Figure 1.22

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