

## Story and Character Development

- **Traditional Story Structure:** Story structure has been the topic for screenwriting classes for decades. It is seen as a formula that, when applied correctly, can ensure an audience's/player's emotional involvement in a film/game. The most common structure is known as the three-act plot structure.

### Three (3) acts:

- **Beginning (Act I):** The most interesting stories begin by placing the audience into the action or drama of the story. The backstory and any background events leading up to this moment can be introduced later. The goal is to capture the audience's attention. Act I focuses on the character's problem. The story should introduce this problem immediately.
- **Middle (Act II):** The middle of the story focuses on the obstacles that stand in the way of the character's ability to solve the problem introduced in Act I. There are usually a series of obstacles in Act II that the character must overcome. This act comprises the bulk of the dramatic tension in the story.
- **End (Act III):** The story ends when the problem introduced in Act I has been solved. The character often has to systematically face and remove each obstacle in Act II to reach this resolution.

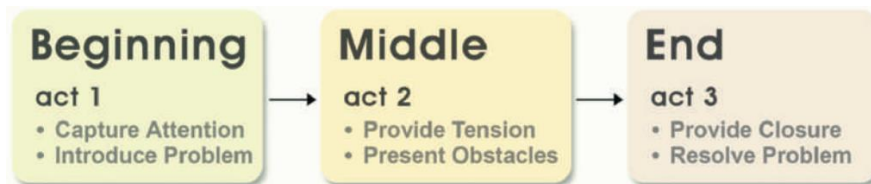


Figure 1. Three-act story structure

- **Story Elements:** Storylines exist in many games, but they are not necessary for a satisfying game-playing experience such as puzzle games (i.e., Tetris). However, some role-playing games (RPGs) rely heavily on the story. An RPG is mostly like a movie for some players—where the game can become merely a delivery vehicle for the story.
- The following story elements—premise, backstory, synopsis, theme, and setting will help you begin to take your rough ideas and structure them into a preliminary form.
- **Premise:** The premise or high concept is a summary (consisting of 1-2 sentences or a short paragraph) of the game's purpose and overall

theme, and it often appears on packaging associated with the game. It is intended to intrigue customers, enticing them to purchase the game. This summary should focus on what is unique about your game. In addressing the player directly, you also might want to indicate the game's genre.

- **Backstory:** A backstory provides information that leads up to where the game begins. It usually consists of a short paragraph in the game instruction manual, or it appears as text (usually accompanied by a voice-over) at the beginning of the game. This helps orient the player to the purpose and action involved in the game, and it allows the player to sometimes establish initial bonds for certain characters.
- **Synopsis:** A synopsis or storyline can also exist throughout the game itself. In this case, the player might be involved in the setting and actions that take place in the game. A running storyline can also help a player escape from reality and become immersed in the "artificial" game world, during which the player can become emotionally involved with the game's characters.
- **Theme:** The theme represents what the story is truly about—even if it's not shared explicitly with the player. Themes usually relate to a primary obstacle in the story faced by the main character(s). The obstacle can be the enemy(villain), nature, society, face—or the character themselves. The theme could be a defining question—such as "Is murder justified?" or "Can love triumph?"
- **Setting:** The setting or backdrop represents the world that is being explored by the audience, characters, or player. In creating a game story, think of the world in which your characters will live and interact. Think beyond the stereotypes. Will it be a real-world location (e.g., Sahara Desert, Alaskan tundra), or a specific time period (e.g., Victorian era, Roaring '20s)? Will it take place in the world of organized crime, behind the scenes of network news, or amid the uncomplicated lifestyle of the Amish? Also, Provide the history and geography of the world and the settings associated with traditional media genres such as science fiction (space), horror (haunted house), or mystery (crime scene), etc.
- **Plot:** The plot is more about how the story unfolds rather than what the story is about. Game plotting can be part of the game's story structure—but it can also be dictated by how the game is played. It is a sequence of events in a story that forces a character to make increasingly difficult decisions, driving the story toward a climactic event and resolution.
- **Balancing conflict:** Dramatic tension in a story is maximized when the player often seems to be on the brink of disaster but is able to escape repeatedly from this situation by just the narrowest of margins.

- **Shifting Focus:** Even though players make choices and have apparent freedom while playing the game, players can be drawn back to the main storyline. This effective storytelling technique can be accomplished by shifting focus while capturing the player's interest—such as widening the scope of the game by providing more subquests or by introducing new characters or objects that lead the player into other unexplored areas.
- **Suspension of Disbelief:** With suspension of disbelief, your story must somehow cause the players to forget real life and accept the artificial reality you've created. This is related to immersion, but it more specifically refers to the players' acceptance of rules and experiences that might not make sense in the real world. Examples are people in a game could fly without the aid of air transport, the game world included a rule indicating that all characters who resembled humans were evil, while the horrific-looking demons were good.
- **Realism:** In contrast to the suspension of disbelief device, realism can be used in games to mimic the real world as closely as possible. In this case, players want reality and authenticity. Such stories might include the visual realism of a contemporary real-world setting.

### Classic Character Archetypes

- **Hero:** The hero archetype is the central character in a single-player game. When you create a hero character, keep in mind that the hero will be the player's avatar—and the player must identify and bond with this character. The hero archetype is the central character in a single-player game. When you create a hero character, keep in mind that the hero will be the player's avatar—and the player must identify and bond with this character.
- **Shadow:** The shadow is an extremely important character—representing the hero's opposite, often the ultimate evil character in a story. The shadow could be the adversary who is responsible for the hero's problem. Sometimes this character remains hidden until the story's climax, which can add to the story's dramatic tension. Sometimes the shadow represents the dark side of the hero.
- **Mentor:** The mentor is a character who often guides the hero toward some action and often an older advisor character—someone who might have been in the hero's shoes at one time, who can provide the hero with wisdom learned from that experience of making a similar journey.
- **Ally:** An ally is a character who helps the hero progress on the journey and may also assist the hero with tasks that might be difficult or impossible to accomplish alone.
- **Guardian:** The guardian blocks the progress of the hero by whatever means necessary—until the hero has proven his or her worth. The guardian character tests the hero. By answering the riddle correctly, the hero has proven worthy of continuing on the journey. Sometimes the guardian character is the shadow's henchman. The guardian could also be a “block” that exists within the hero's mind—such as self-doubt, fear, discomfort—that makes the character hesitate to continue on the journey.
- **Trickster:** The trickster is a neutral character who enjoys making mischief. Trickster characters can either cause severe damage through their pranks, which can stop the hero from progressing along the journey, but they are more often simply jesters who provide comic relief for the story.
- **Herald:** The herald facilitates change in the story and provides the hero with direction.
- **Protagonist:** The protagonist is the main character. A single-player game centers around this character and the game's story is told from this character's point of view, even if the game is not played in a first-person perspective. The protagonist must always drive the story forward—acting instead of reacting, making things happen instead of waiting for them to happen. The protagonist is unusually strong physically or morally—but not always “good.” In fact, the protagonist often has a fatal (or tragic) flaw—which is universal and reflects vulnerability. This makes the character likable and human—allowing the audience to identify and empathize with this.
- **Antagonist:** The antagonist is the opposite of the protagonist. This does not mean that the antagonist is “bad.” The protagonist and antagonist could simply have opposing views—political (liberal vs. conservative), ethical (privacy vs. security), or lifestyle preferences (business vs. family).
- When the protagonist and antagonist want the exact same things (e.g., love interest, precious stone, or leadership of a clan), they become linked together in the story. This device is known as the **unity of opposites**, and it makes any conflict or competition more relevant. Interestingly, players can sometimes become attracted to an evil force in a game—which is why some player characters are antagonists. There are several types of evil antagonists that often appear in stories—including *transformational*, *mistaken*, *exaggerated*, and *realistic*.
- **Transformational:** A transformational antagonist is an anti-hero character who could have been a protagonist. This antagonist receives punishment at the end of the story to satisfy the audience's need for

justice. Although the anger and humiliation faced by this character might stir up feelings of empathy in the audience, her power causes the deaths of innocent people. In the process of destroying others, she is killed—and the audience feels some sense of relief.

- **Mistaken:** Mistaken antagonists are characters who the audience initially thinks are villains—but they turn out to be innocent. These characters are popular in murder mysteries and crime dramas.
- **Exaggerated:** Exaggerated antagonists are those who are larger-than-life, bizarre, and sometimes even comedic villains who might even dominate the story because they are often more interesting than the protagonist.
- **Supporting Characters:** Supporting characters—also known as pivotal characters—exist primarily to prevent the protagonist from walking away. The supporting characters often jump-start the action in the story—sometimes even through carrying out the bidding of the antagonist. These characters bring a variety of viewpoints to the story. They can be your sidekicks or antagonist's henchmen.
- **Game Characters:** Game characters are either player characters or non-player characters (also known as NPCs). Sometimes one player can control several player characters (often in a group, such as sports teams or military troops).
- **Player Characters & Avatars:** Player characters are characters or other entities in a game world that are controlled by the players. When a player controls only one character, that character is called an avatar. The direct connection between the player and the avatar can sometime result in a player assigning a personal identity to the avatar. This can be more pronounced if the avatar displays realistic features and actions.
- **Non-Player Characters:** Non-player characters (NPCs) are those characters in a game world not controlled by players. Instead, these characters are created and controlled by the game's artificial intelligence (AI) engine.
- **Character Development Elements:** Basic character development in a story involves the relationships among characters and the changes they might undergo throughout a story. The elements of the *character triangle* and *character arc* play a significant role in the development of character relationships and character change.
- **Character Triangle:** A character triangle forms a powerful three-way relationship among characters in a story. The most common example of this is a love triangle in which the protagonist and antagonist both vie for the attention of the same love interest (supporting character). There

can be many triangles in a story, and the character's role can change based on each of these triangles.

- **Character Arc:** A protagonist rarely changes during the course of a story—but the character always grows. The process of character growth and development is called the character arc. This arc consists of several levels and is illustrated through a character's behavior rather than monologue or dialogue. Understanding a character's value system is the core of character development. The following character development levels are based on sociologist *Abraham Maslow's hierarchy* of needs model. The levels begin with the smallest unit, the self, and expand to the largest (and most abstract) unit, humanity.
- **Level 1 Intrapersonal:** In the intrapersonal level, the protagonist is concerned only with his or her own needs and thoughts.
- **Level 2 Interpersonal:** In the interpersonal level, the protagonist bonds with another character in a one-on-one relationship. This other character could be a lover, friend, colleague, or family member. The protagonist is no longer just looking out for himself or herself, but another character as well.
- **Level 3 Team:** At the team level, the protagonist bonds with a small group of characters who have common interests. These characters could be members of the protagonist's circle of friends, family, sports team, or activity club. The need to *belong* is fulfilled at this level. An example of this level occurs in many MMOGs that involve the formation of guilds with other players.
- **Level 4 Community:** At the community level, the smaller team becomes part of a larger organized network, which could include a neighborhood, city, school, or company
- **Level 5 Humanity:** In the humanity level, the protagonist often goes through what Maslow calls self-actualization—spiritual growth that can occur now that the protagonist has achieved comfort, love, and acceptance among a larger community.

#### References:

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