How do games tell stories?

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leads down the well into
darkness
There is a large gold nugget
here
There is some jewelry here
What now?
DROP RUG
What now?
DROP BARS
What now?
LIGHT LAMP
The lamp is on
What now?
PLUGH
You are in a huge room with
passages to the south and west
and a maze of broken rock to
the east. 'Y2' is carved on a
rock in the very centre of the
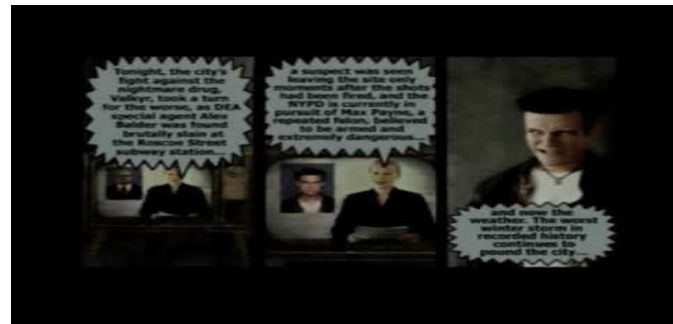room
What now?

1st Arcade Game that tells a story…

Cutscenes

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Shadow of the Tomb Raider (2018)

Some of the cutscenes use highly detailed models in pre-produced animations.

Max Payne (2001)

Other cutscenes use low detail, like comics.
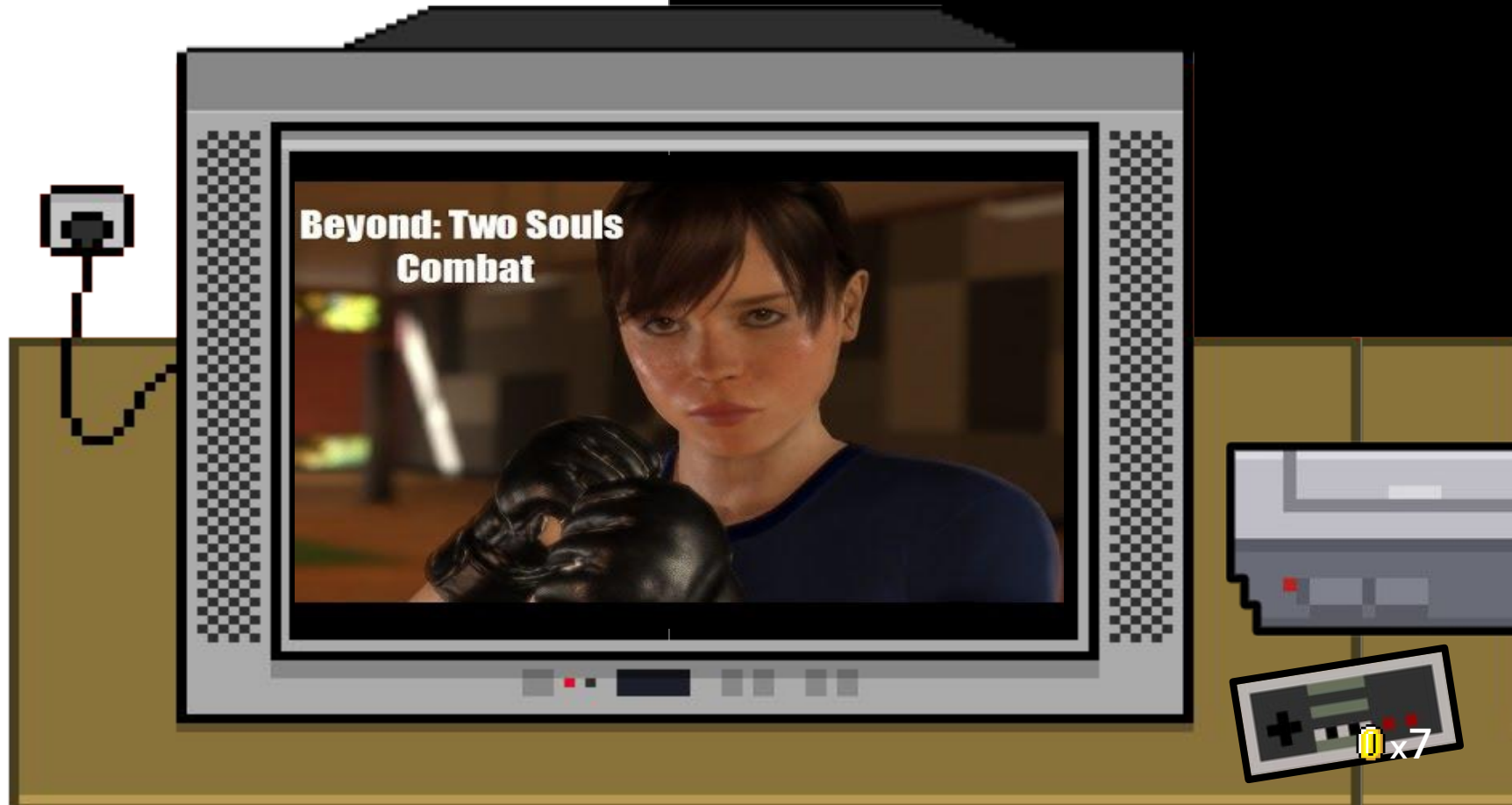
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Quick-time Events - Dragons's Lair (1983)

Quick-time Events - Fahrenheit (David Cage, 2005)

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Quick-time Events - Beyond: Two Souls (David Cage, 2013)

Scripted Game Scenes

Half-Life (1998)

The movements of the avatar are restricted to follow the story…

Call of Duty Black Ops II" (2012)

"Call of Duty", although still using some cutscenes, provides scripted characters and visual tips that direct the player to follow the story plot.

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Storytelling (1/2)

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For greater experience ➔
Focus on the story!

"If games are going to be a true dominant art
form in this century, we have to elevate them
beyond the simple mechanics of the
gameplay or the graphics.
All that matters is actually the experience.
When we realized this, that's when we started
focusing on story"

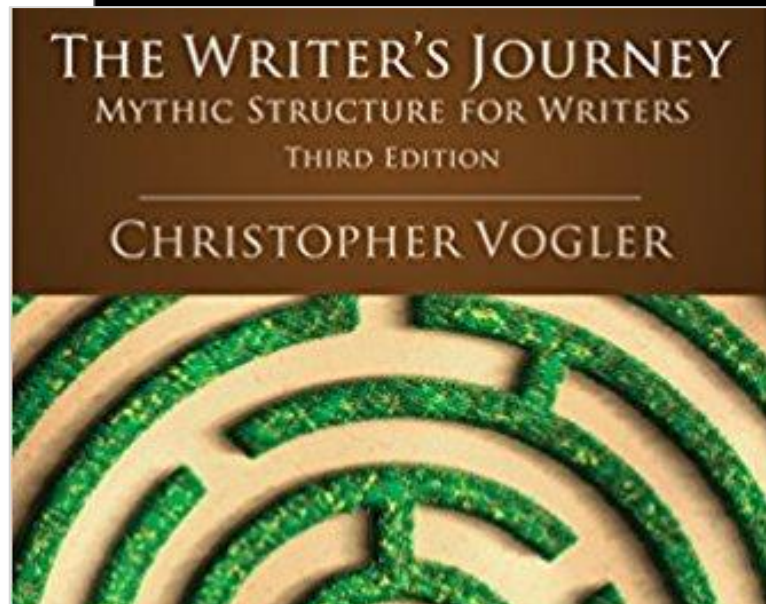Denis Dyack, president, Silicon Knights

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The Hero's journey
——

"The hero with a thousand faces"

- Published by mythologist **Joseph Campbell**
- Introduces the concept of **monomyth**
- Describes an underlying structure that most mythological stories seem to share.
- George Lucas based his story "Star Wars" on these structures.
- A basis for Vogler's **"The writer's journey"**

A practical guide to writing stories using Campbell archetypes.

x10

The Hero's journey

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Storytelling (2/2)

- **Who** is the game about?
- **What** is the goal?
- **When** does the story takes place?
- **Where** does the story takes place?
- **Why** is this going on in the story, and why do you as the player care?
- **How** are you going to accomplish your goals and interact with the story and the characters?

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Story Structure (1/3)

The recipe: "Three acts"

Act 1: The beginning

The set-up: should be short & compelling

- Capture the audience attention & introduce the problem.
- **Games:** players need to learn how to use the game.

Act 2: Middle

Where the action takes place.

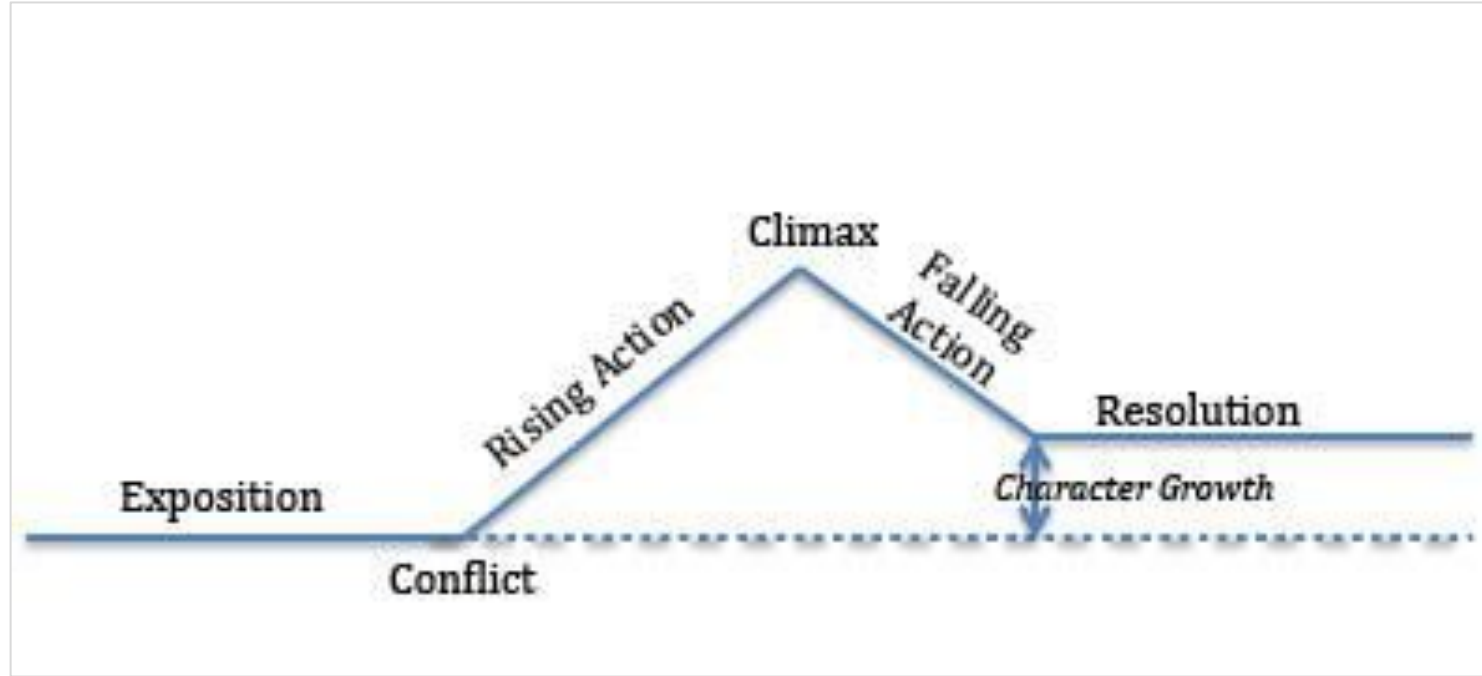Provide tension & present obstacles.

Act 3: The End

Wrap-up of the story

- Provide closure and resolve the problem.
- Games: can have different endings…

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Story Structure (2/3)

The Narrative Arc

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Story Structure (3/3)

The "secret" of the recipe…

Characters in conflict!

Pushing towards a goal that each desires and only one can have.
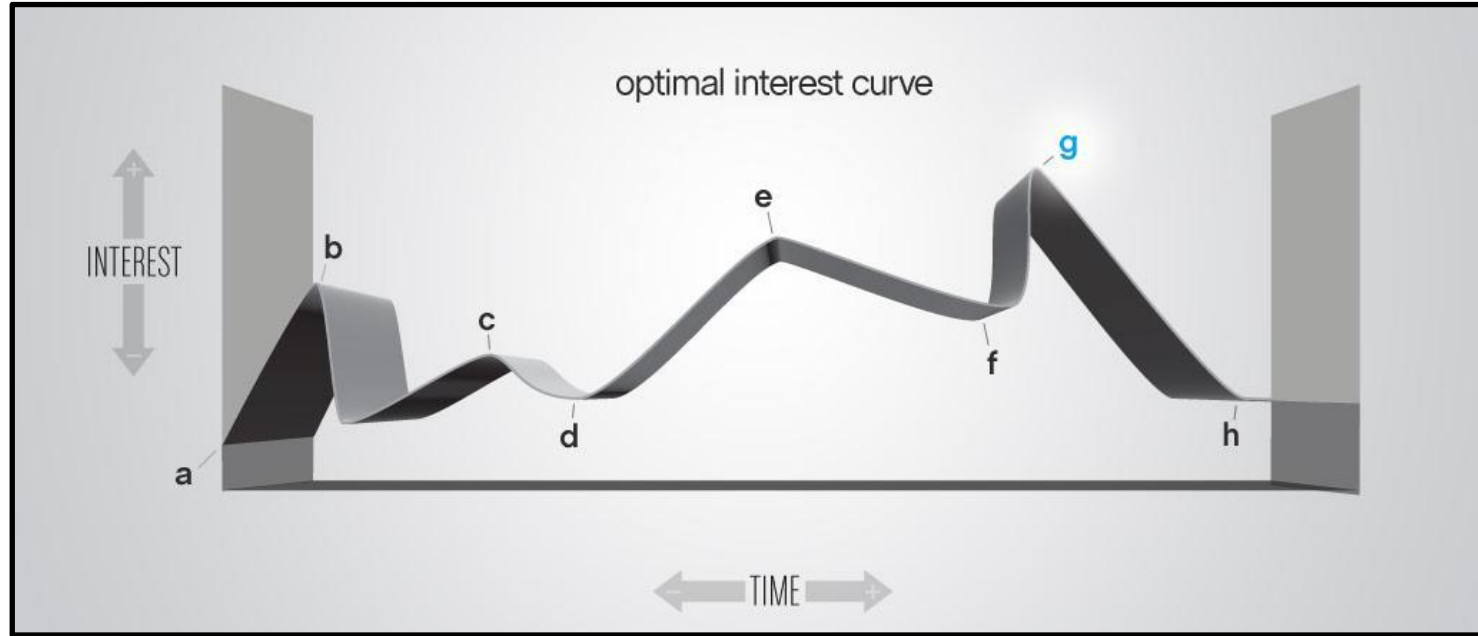
Usually includes a protagonist and an antagonist.

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Good pace of "highs" & "lows"

Avoid that the player gets:
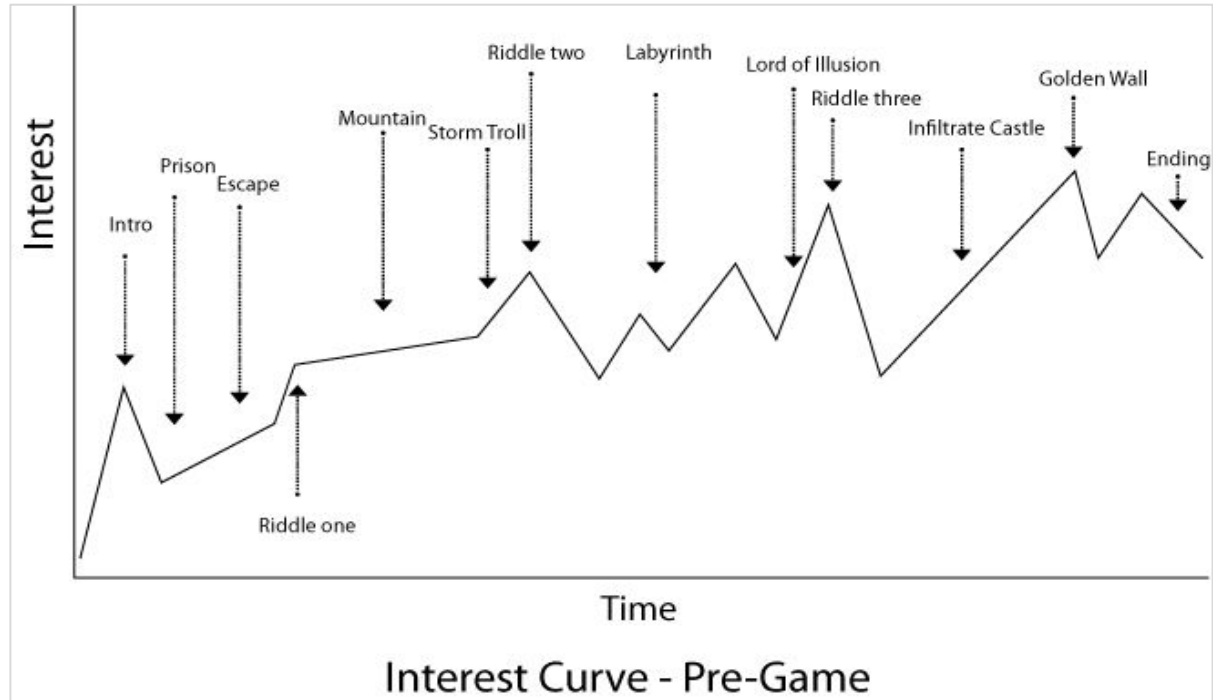- Exhausted
- Bored

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The Interest Curve

optimal interest curve

INTEREST

a b c d e f g h

TIME

🪙x16

The Interest Curve - example

Interest Curve - Pre-Game

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The Lens of The Interest Curve

61 The Lens of
The Interest Curve

Illustration by Chris Daniel

What captivates the human mind often seems different for every person - but in fact it is remarkably similar for everyone. To see how a player's interest in your experience changes over time, ask yourself these questions:

Lens #61

If I draw an interest curve of my experience, how is it shaped?

Does it have a hook? Is there gradually rising interest, punctuated by periods of rest?

Is there a grand finale, more interesting than everything else?

What changes would give me a better interest curve?

Is there a fractal structure to my interest curve? Should there be?

Do my intuitions about the interest curve match the observed interest of the players? If I ask playtesters to draw an interest curve, what does it look like?

x18

Story Elements (1/2)

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Premise (High concept)

The summary of the game purpose. (1-2 sentences)

- Focus on what's unique about the game.
- Indicate the game's genre.

Examples

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Wolverine's Revenge:
"You have just 48 hours to find an antidote for the virus that was implanted in Wolverine. Along the way you'll face some of the greatest X-Men villains."

Driver:
"Drive a getaway car for the mob in this action-packed street-racing game."

Crysis 2:
"It's 2023, terrifying alien invaders stalk the New York City streets. Only you can prevail, wielding the supersoldier enhancements of Nanosuit 2."

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Story Elements (2/2)

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Theme
- What the story is all about.

Backstory
- Information that leads up to where the game begins.

Synopsis
- The running storyline that can also exists throughout the game itself.

Setting
- The world that is being explored by the audience, characters or players.
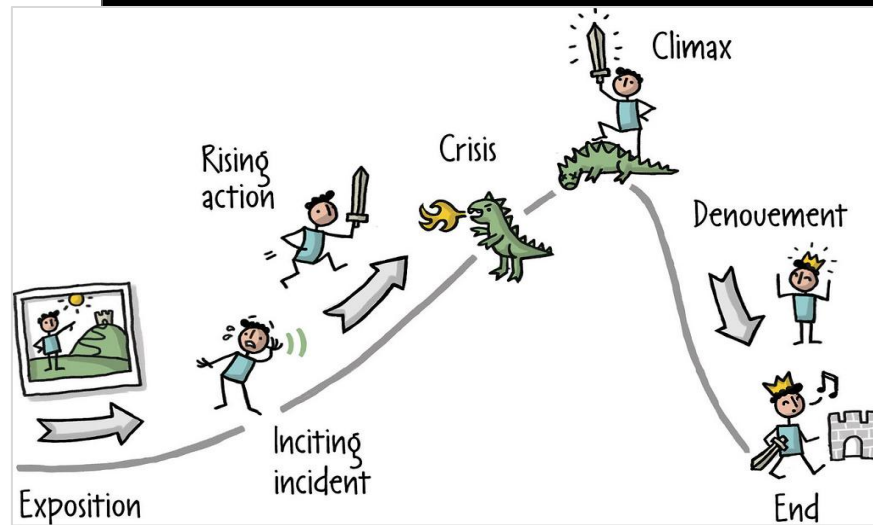

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Plot (1/3)

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Balancing conflict

● Maximize dramatic tension by often placing the player on the brink of disaster... but allowing him to escape repeatedly.

Shifting focus

● So that players are drawn back to the storyline.

Suspension of disbelief

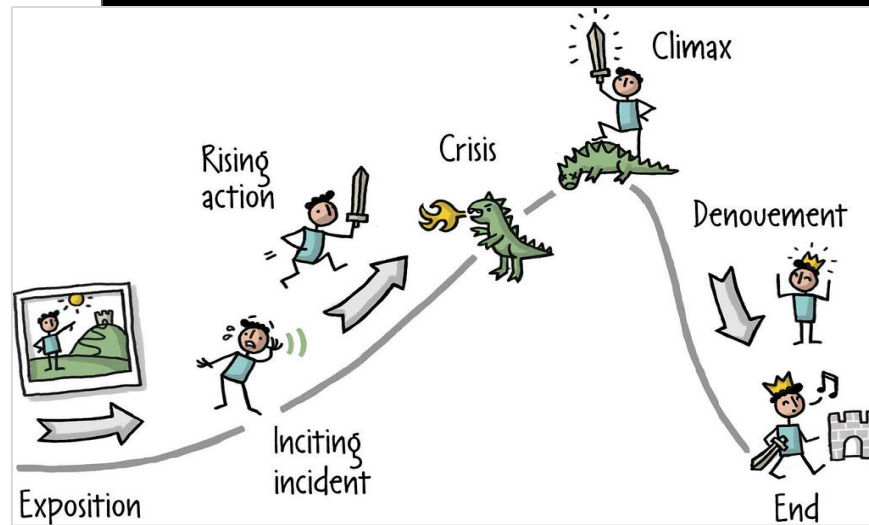● Make the players forget real life.

x21

Plot (2/3)

Main events of the story

Realism (with a grain of salt) / Credibility
- Mimic real world as closely as possible.
- **"Harmony":** Nothing should seem out of place or inconsistent.

Organic
- Make sure that all things that happen within the story are natural occurrences to that time and place.

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Plot (3/3)

The plot sequence
- Avoid "then…" (random sequential events)
  - "This happens, and then this happens, and…"

- Use "because…" (cause-effect logic)
  - "This happens, and because this happened, then this happens, and…"

Plot sequence example

"I walked into a dark tunnel, and because it was dark I couldn't see where I was going so I triped, and because I tripped the two guys leaning against the far wall heard me and started to shoot…"

x23

Game Story Devices

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Games provide much more possibilities…

Interactivity

- Games have a higher level of interactivity than other media.

Non-linearity

- Games do not have to follow a linear storyline.

Player control

- The player can become the storyteller.

Collaboration

- Multiplayer game mode makes possible collaborative storytelling.

Immersion

- Animations at the wrong time can disrupt immersion.

x24

Story tips for game designers

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#1. Goals, obstacles and conflicts

#2. Provide simplicity and transcendence

#3. Consider the Hero's Journey

#4. Put your story to work!

#5. Keep your story world consistent

#6. Make your story world accessible

#7. Use clichés judiciously
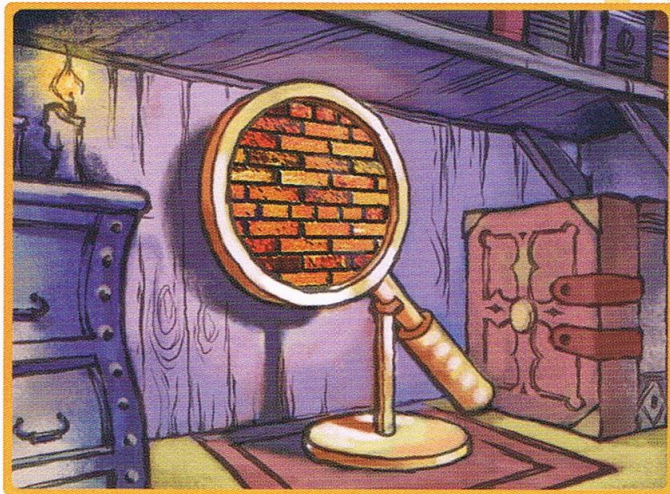
#8. Sometimes a map brings a story to life

x25

The Lens of The Obstacle

66 💭 **The Lens of The Obstacle**

Illustration by Sam Yip

A goal with no obstacles is not worth pursuing. Use this lens to make sure your obstacles are ones that your players will want to overcome.

Lens #66

What is the relationship between the main character and the goal? Why does the character care about it?

What are the obstacles between the character and the goal?

Is there an antagonist who is behind the obstacles? What is the relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist?

Do the obstacles gradually increase in difficulty?

Some say "The bigger the obstacle, the better the story". Are your obstacles big enough? Can they be bigger?
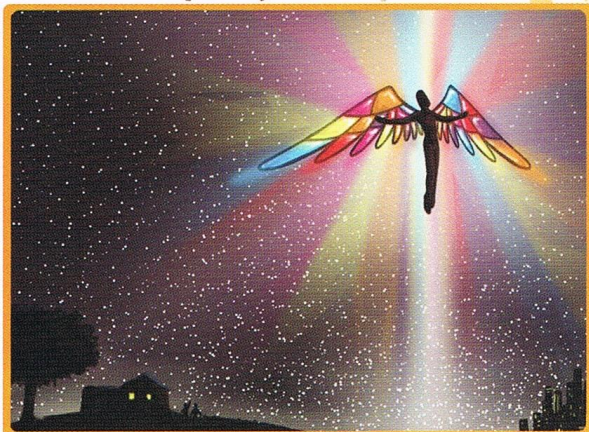
Great stories often involve the protagonist transforming in order to overcome the obstacle. How does your protagonist transform?

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The Lens of Simplicity and Transcendence

Lens #67

How is my world simpler than the real world? Can it be simpler in other ways?

What kind of transcendent power do I give the player? How can I give them even more without removing challenge from the game?

Is my contribution of simplicity and transcendence contrived, or does it provide my players with a special kind of wish fulfillment?

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Story Checklist

- Story fundamentals include who, what, when, where, why and how.
  - In game design this includes the characters and the players' interaction with them, the environment, levels and puzzles, the mechanics and the players experience of gameplay.
- Story is defined around conflict and usually includes a protagonist and an antagonist.
- Stories are a series of related events – the Plot.
  - Use "because" instead of "then" and keep organic.
- Focus on the interest curve for greater experience.
- Games provide much more possibilities to the storytelling.

Story Acts

Story structure should be considered in three acts:

Act 1 is a short set-up for establishing the story.

Act 2 is the bulk of the character's journey.

Act 3 is the wrap-up of the adventure.

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