

Story Structure

By Dan Harmon

All text by Dan Harmon

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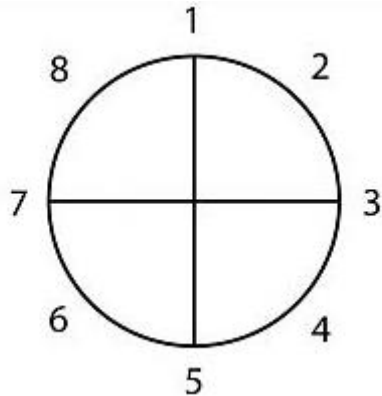
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Contents

101: Super Basic Shit	4
102: Pure, Boring Theory	7
THE RHYTHM OF BIOLOGY	8
THE RHYTHM OF PSYCHOLOGY	10
THE RHYTHM OF SOCIETY	12
RESONANCE.....	14
103: Let's Simplify Before Moving On	15
104: The Juicy Details	18
“You” – ESTABLISH A PROTAGONIST	19
“Need” – SOMETHING AIN'T QUITE RIGHT	21
"Go" – CROSSING THE THRESHOLD.....	23
"Search" – THE ROAD OF TRIALS	25
"Find" – MEETING WITH THE GODDESS	27
"Take" – MEET YOUR MAKER.....	31
"Return" – BRINGING IT HOME	35
"Change" – MASTER OF BOTH WORLDS	37
105: How TV is Different	43
106: Five Minute Pilots	47
FAQ	56

101:

Super Basic Shit



Storytelling comes naturally to humans, but since we live in an unnatural world, we sometimes need a little help doing what we'd naturally do.

Here we go, down and dirty:

1. A character is in a zone of comfort,
2. But they want something.
3. They enter an unfamiliar situation,
4. Adapt to it,
5. Get what they wanted,
6. Pay a heavy price for it,
7. Then return to their familiar situation,
8. Having changed.

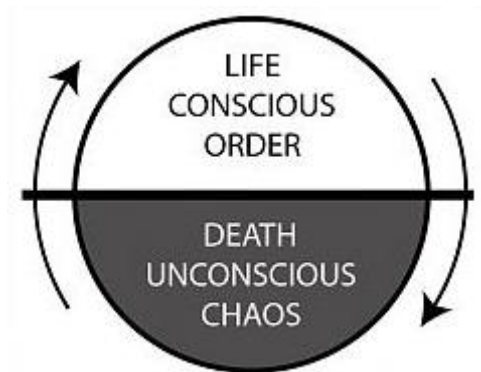
Start thinking of as many of your favorite movies as you can, and see if they apply to this pattern. Now think of your favorite party anecdotes, your most vivid dreams, fairy tales, and listen to a popular song (the music, not necessarily the lyrics).

Get used to the idea that stories follow that pattern of descent and return, diving and emerging. Demystify it. See it everywhere. Realize

that it's hardwired into your nervous system, and trust that in a vacuum, raised by wolves, your stories would follow this pattern.

102:

Pure, Boring Theory

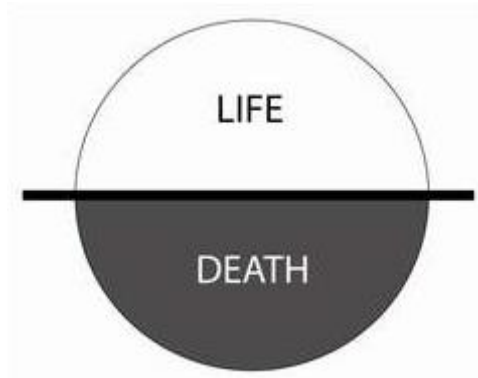


This isn't a tutorial. It's just a bunch of theory. The pragmatic or impatient among you can skip this one.

Why this ritual of descent and return? Why does a story have to contain certain elements, in a certain order, before the audience will even recognize it as a story?

Because our society, each human mind within it and all of life itself has a rhythm, and when you play in that rhythm, it resonates.

THE RHYTHM OF BIOLOGY



The universe around us is dying, moving from a state of high energy to low. On Earth, however, things tend to move in a contrary direction. Eggs turn into chickens. People turn into more people.

Flesh heals, stupid becomes smarter, and the planet, once cold and empty, is now so full of life that you can't leave bread on the counter. How has life managed to cheat a dying universe like this?

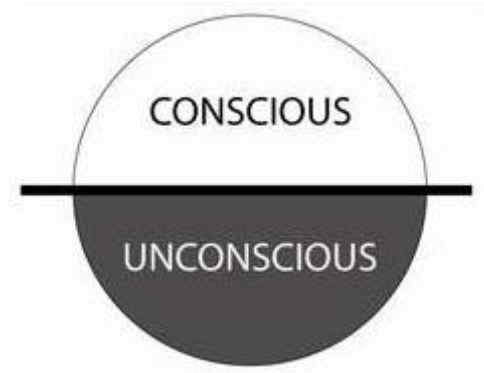
Through death.

This planet-wide creature known as "Life on Earth" has been able to grow and thrive through an evolutionary arms race between the various parts of itself. The more advanced parts of life EAT the less advanced parts, thereby becoming more plentiful until a more advanced part consumes it. This causes all life to advance and spread. The ongoing battle between eaters and eaten is responsible for that state-of-the-art biological weapon you call a brain, and it may even lead, one day, to humans flinging themselves like spores, to dead planets and bringing those planets to life.

To you and me, consciously, death may be a bummer, but to Mother Gaia, to life itself, unconsciously, it is absolutely essential—50% of how shit gets done.

What do I mean by consciously and unconsciously?

THE RHYTHM OF PSYCHOLOGY



Your mind is a home, with an upstairs and a downstairs.

Upstairs, in your consciousness, things are well-lit and regularly swept. Friends visit. Scrabble is played, hot cocoa is brewing. It is a pleasant, familiar place.

Downstairs, it is older, darker and much, much freakier. We call this basement the unconscious mind.

The unconscious is exactly what it sounds like: It's the stuff you don't, won't and/or can't think about. According to Freud, there are dirty pictures of your mother down there. According to Jung, there are pipes, wires, even tunnels down there that connect your home to others. And even though it contains life-sustaining energies (like

the fuse box and water heater), it's a primitive, stinky, scary place and it's no wonder that, given the choice, we don't hang out down there.

However, your pleasure, your sanity and even your life depend on occasional round trips. You've got to change the fuses, grab the Christmas ornaments, and clean the litter box.

To the extent that we keep the basement door sealed, the entire home becomes unstable. The creatures downstairs get louder and the guy upstairs (your ego) tries to cover the noise with neurotic behavior. For some, eventually, the basement door can come right off its hinges and the slimy, primal denizens of the deep can become Scrabble partners. You might call this a nervous breakdown or psychotic break, it doesn't matter.

The point is: Occasional ventures by the ego into the unconscious, through therapy, meditation, confession, sex, violence, or a good story, keep the consciousness in working order.

This is the rhythm of psychology: Conscious–unconscious–conscious–unconscious–etc.

THE RHYTHM OF SOCIETY



Societies are basically macrocosms (big versions) of people, only instead of "consciousness," a society's upstairs is "order," and its basement is "chaos."

Whereas the health of an individual depends on the ego's regular descent and return to and from the unconscious, a society's longevity depends on actual people journeying into the unknown and returning with ideas.

In their most dramatic, revolutionary form, these people are called heroes, but every day, society is replenished by millions of people diving into darkness and emerging with something new (or

forgotten): scientists, painters, teachers, dancers, actors, priests, athletes, architects and most importantly, me, Dan Harmon.

Societies are macrocosms of people in another way: Eventually, they die. There is competition between different societies. The losers are eaten and the winners reproduce.

Like people, societies become neurotic and can eventually break down when they make the mistake of thinking the downstairs shouldn't exist. America is a terrific example of this, as our fear of the unknown continues to create more unknowns and more fear. It's now punishable by bombing to have a problem with America's bombing policy. In a human being, the equivalent would be diagnosable as symptomatic. Our basement is brimming with creepy crawlies, the pressure on the door is building. There has never been a bigger need for heroes and they have never been in such scarcity.

One of two things is going to happen. Someone's going to open that door and go down there, or that door is going fly off its hinges. Either way, social evolution will not be cheated of its rhythm and it's going to get sloppy. We all know it. We all walk around with that instinctive understanding in our unconscious minds.

The rhythm of society: Order–chaos–order–chaos–etc.

RESONANCE

Now you understand that all life, including the human mind and the communities we create, marches to the same, very specific beat. If your story also marches to this beat– whether your story is the great American novel or a fart joke– it will resonate. It will send your audience's ego on a brief trip to the unconscious and back. Your audience has an instinctive taste for that, and they're going to say "yum."

103:

Let's Simplify Before Moving On

Here are those steps from tutorial 101 again, boiled down to the barest minimum I can manage while still speaking English:

1. When you
2. have a need,
3. you go somewhere,

4. search for it,
5. find it,
6. take it,
7. then return
8. and change things.

Less focus on English, more on importance:

1. You
2. Need
3. Go
4. Search
5. Find
6. Take
7. Return
8. CHANGE

Sounds like a caveman giving you an order. That's what it is. Behind (and beneath) your culture creating forebrain, there is an older, simpler monkey brain with a lot less to say and a much louder voice.

One of the few things it's telling you, over and over again, is that you need to go search, find, take and return with change. Why? Because that is how the human animal has kept from going extinct, its how human societies keep from collapsing and how you keep from walking into McDonald's with a machine gun.

If you were hired to write a script for a race of super-evolved spiders, you might find that they prefer a more linear model. In the spider version of Jack and the Beanstalk, Jack might build his own beanstalk, find a sandwich at the top of it, eat some and save some for later. The End. That's not really inspiring to us. We like us some circles. We like big ones, we like little ones, and given the choice, we'll take a shitty one over a lack of one, but, unless you're writing for some other species, it will pay for you to keep things fairly round.

Jack goes up the beanstalk, Jack finds some cool shit, Jack steals it, runs back down, and gives it to his Mom.

We need go search– We need get fire, we need good woman, we need land moon– but most importantly, we need **return** and we need **change**, because we are a community, and if our heroes just climbed beanstalks and never came down, we wouldn't have survived our first ice age.

104:

The Juicy Details

Okay, here's that part where the self-appointed guru tells you exactly what needs to happen and when.

I hope I've made it clear to you before I do that that the REAL structure of any good story is simply circular – a descent into the unknown and eventual return – and that any specific descriptions of that process are specific to you and your story.

Here is my detailed description of the steps on the circle. I'm going to get really specific, and I'm not going to bother saying, "there are some exceptions to this" over and over. There are exceptions to everything, but that's called style, not structure.

1. You (a character is in a zone of comfort)
2. Need (but they want something)
3. Go (they enter an unfamiliar situation)
4. Search (adapt to it)
5. Find (find what they wanted)
6. Take (pay its price)
7. Return (and go back to where they started)
8. Change (now capable of change)

“You” – ESTABLISH A PROTAGONIST

The audience is floating freely, like a ghost, until you give them a place to land.

This free floating effect can be exploited for a while – closing in on the planet Earth; panning across a dirty shed. Who are we going to be? But sooner or later, we need to be someone, because if we are not inside a character, then we are not inside the story.

How do you put the audience into a character? Easy. Show one. You'd have to go out of your way to keep the audience from imprinting on them. It could be a raccoon, a homeless man or the President. Just fade in on them and we are them until we have a better choice.

If there are choices, the audience picks someone to whom they relate. When in doubt, they follow their pity. Fade in on a raccoon being chased by a bear, we are the raccoon. Fade in on a room full of ambassadors. The President walks in and trips on the carpet. We are the President. When you feel sorry for someone, you're using the same part of your brain you use to identify with them.

Lots of modern stories bounce us from character to character in the beginning until we finally settle in some comfortable shoes. The bouncing can be effective, but if it's going on for more than 25% of your total story, you're going to lose the audience. Like anything adhesive, our sense of identity weakens a little every time it's switched or tested. The longer it's been stuck on something, the

more jarring it's going to be to yank it away and stick it on someone else.

I wouldn't fuck around if I were you. The easiest thing to do is fade in on a character that always does what the audience would do. He can be an assassin, he can be a raccoon, he can be a parasite living in the raccoon's liver, but have him do what the audience might do if they were in the same situation. In Die Hard, we fade in on John McClaine, a passenger on an airplane who doesn't like to fly.

“Need” – SOMETHING AIN'T QUITE RIGHT

And now the roller coaster car heads up the first hill. Click, click, click....

This is where we demonstrate that something is off balance in the universe, no matter how large or small that universe is. If this is a story about a war between Earth and Mars, this is a good time to show those Martian ships heading toward our peaceful planet. On

the other hand, if this is a romantic comedy, maybe our heroine is at dinner, on a bad blind date.

We're being presented with the idea that things aren't perfect. They could be better. This is where a character might wonder out loud, or with facial expressions, why he can't be cooler, or richer, or faster, or a better lover. This wish will be granted in ways that character couldn't have expected.

It's also where a more literal, exterior "call to adventure" could come in, at the hands of a mysterious messenger, explaining to a dry cleaner that he has been drafted by the CIA.

Frequently, the protagonist "refuses the call." He doesn't want to go to step 3. He's happy as a dry cleaner (at least he thinks he is). The "refusal of the call" is not a necessary ingredient, it's just another oft-used trick to keep us buckled into an identity. We're all scared of change.

Remember: Calls to adventure don't have to come from an actual messenger and wishes don't have to be made out loud.

Fade in on a meek-looking man driving a car. It's raining. Boom. Flat tire. He struggles to keep the car from ditching. He pulls it to

the side of the road and stops. He's got fear on his face. He looks out his car window at the pounding rain...

Or to continue with Die Hard: We realize now that John's marriage is rocky. His wife got a nice job in L.A. and he refused to come here with her. Now he's visiting for Christmas. She's using her maiden name in the corporate directory. They're bickering. Things are not right, and if you could read the protagonist's mind, you might find him wishing there was something he could do to save his marriage...

"Go" – CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

What's your story about? If it's about a woman running from a killer cyborg, then up until now, she has not been running from a killer cyborg. If your story is about an infatuation, this might be the point where our male hero first lays eyes on the object of his desire. Then again, if our protagonist is the object of a dangerous obsession, the infatuation could have been step 2 and this could be the point where the guy says something really, really creepy to her in the office hall. If it's a coming of age story, this could be a first kiss or

the discovery of an armpit hair. If it's a slasher film, this is the first kill, or the discovery of a corpse.

The key is, figure out what your "movie poster" is. What would you advertise to people if you wanted them to come listen to your story? A killer shark? Outer space? The Mafia? True love? Everything in grey on that circle, the bottom half, is a "special world" where that movie poster starts being delivered, and everything above this line is the "ordinary world." Step 1, you are the sheriff of a small town. Step 2, strange bites on a murder victim's body. Step 3, holy shit, it's a werewolf.

Remember from tutorial 102 that what's really happening here is a journey into our own unconscious mind, where we can get our shit worked out. A child wakes up and now he's Tom Hanks. His wish to be "big" has been granted. Terrorists attack the Christmas party, and now John McClaine has his chance to literally save his rocky marriage. Neo wakes up in a vat of goo in a world ruled by machines. His ordinary world desire to be a hacker, to fight the system, is going to be put to the test. A suicidal boy starts seeing a therapist. We're going to find out why he tried to kill himself.

It doesn't matter how small or large the scope of your story is, what matters is the amount of contrast between these worlds. In our story

about the man changing his tire in the rain, up until now, he wasn't changing a tire. He was inside a dry car. Now, he opens his car door and steps into the pouring rain. The adventure, regardless of its size or subtlety, has begun.

"Search" – THE ROAD OF TRIALS

Christopher Vogler calls this phase of a feature script "friends, enemies and allies." Hack producers call it the "training phase." I prefer to stick with Joseph Campbell's title, "The Road of Trials," because it's less specific. I've seen too many movies where our time is wasted watching a hero literally "train" in a forest clearing because someone got the idea it was a necessary ingredient. The point of this part of the circle is, our protagonist has been thrown into the water and now it's sink or swim.

In *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell actually evokes the image of a digestive tract, breaking the hero down, divesting him of neuroses, stripping him of fear and desire. There's no room for bullshit in the unconscious basement. Asthma inhalers, eyeglasses, credit cards, fratty boyfriends, promotions, toupees and cell phones

can't save you here. The purpose here has become refreshingly – and frighteningly – simple.

In *Romancing the Stone*, Michael Douglas cuts the heels off of Kathleen Turner's expensive shoes with a machete. Then he throws her suitcase off a cliff. If she's going to continue to survive in this jungle, she literally needs to drop her excess baggage and lose the fancy pants.

In *Die Hard*, John McClaine is advised by a terrorist to whom he earlier showed mercy: "The next time you have a chance to kill someone, don't hesitate." John shoots him several times and thanks his corpse for the advice. The cop has begun to fall away, piece by piece, revealing his inner cowboy.

The man in the pouring rain opens his trunk, revealing a pile of laundry and fast food garbage. He tries moving it around, but finally his frustration takes over and he begins tossing things over his shoulder, emptying the contents of his trunk on the side of the road.

We are headed for the deepest level of the unconscious mind, and we cannot reach it encumbered by all that crap we used to think was important.

"Find" – MEETING WITH THE GODDESS

The road of trial's job is to prepare your protagonist for this meeting. Like a single sperm cell arriving at the egg, your *hero-in-the-making* just found what they were looking for, even if it's not quite what they knew they were looking for.

I'm using the phrase "meeting with the goddess" because Joseph Campbell thought about these things longer and harder than me. Syd Field calls this "the mid-point." Catchy. Robert McKee probably calls it "the nexus of inclination" or something. Unless I'm mistaken, African Americans call it Kwanza.

Whatever you call it, this is a very, very special pivot point. If you look at the circle, you see I've placed the goddess at the very bottom, right in the center. Imagine your protagonist began at the top and has tumbled all the way down here. This is where the universe's natural tendency to pull your protagonist downward has done its job, and for χ amount of time, we experience

weightlessness. Anything goes down here. This is a time for major revelations, and total vulnerability. If you're writing a plot-twisty thriller, twist here and twist hard.

Twist or no, this is also another threshold, in that everything past this point will take a different direction (namely UPWARD), but note that one is not dragged kicking and screaming through these curtains. One hovers here. One will make a choice, then ascend.

Imagine that you're standing on a pier:

1. You see a glimmer through the water and you
2. wonder what it is. While leaning to see, you
3. fall off the pier. You
4. sink down, deeper and deeper until you come to the floor of the lake and see what was catching the sun's rays.
5. It's a human skull / a necklace / a tiny, ancient space craft / a quarter.

It could be anything, good or bad. A lot of times, it's a healthy dose of both. In a hard-boiled detective story, or a James Bond adventure, this could be a more literal, intimate "meeting," if you know what I mean, with a powerful, mysterious female character. This is a great time for sex or making out with the hot chick,

especially if your protagonist has been kung-fuing everybody he meets for the past half hour.

But the goddess doesn't have to be a femme fatale or an angelic damsel. In an all-male or all-female play that takes place around a poker table, the "goddess" could be a character's confession that they lost their job. The goddess can be a gesture, an idea, a gun, a diamond, a destination, or just a moment's freedom from that monster that won't stop chasing you.

In *Die Hard*, John McClaine, having run over broken glass, is sitting in a bathroom, soaking his bloody feet in the sink. It is at this moment that he finally realizes the true extent of his love for his wife, and what he's been doing wrong in their marriage. He (1) has been too stubborn (2). He uses his walkie-talkie, acquired in step (4), to give a message to his wife through his benevolent, happily married, gun-shy counterpart: "She's heard me say 'I love you' a thousand times...but she's never heard me say I'm sorry."

It's not enough to hack and slash your way through symbol after neurotic symbol. The hacking and slashing was a process, that process is over, if only temporarily, and we have reached a second major turn.

The definition of "major" being, of course, in relation to your circle's diameter. Our stranded, rain soaked driver has finished emptying the contents of his trunk on the side of the road. He sees the spare tire and he lets out a very slight, very fast sound of relief. That's all. This is a story about a man changing a tire. That's all the goddess we need.

You might have noticed that, just as (3), the crossing of the threshold, is the opposite of (7) the return, (5), the meeting with the goddess, is the opposite of (1), the protagonist's zone of comfort. Think of (1) as being the arms of mother, however dysfunctional she might be. (5) is a new form of mother, an unconscious version, and there is often a temptation to stay right here. Like at that elf guy's house in Lord of the Rings.

This is very, very important. Movement beyond (5) becomes the protagonist's volition. The water where the sirens sang their seductive song was littered with wrecked ships. The goddess can be the undoing, or the permanent pacification, of non-heroes. It's all fine and well for James Bond to dip his noodle, but he can't lay around here all day. Electropussy might kill him with her flamethrowing lipstick or something.

In (1), we were in the arms of the mother, but were removed by (2), the pull of the father. The need, the longing, the lack of completion, either coming from within or without, drew us to (3) and we were pulled across a threshold into the unknown. We were then transformed (4) into (5), the opposite of a mama's boy: A lady's man.

To reiterate, this doesn't only apply to stories about men having sex. If this is a story of a poor little girl (1) who dreamt of being rich (2) and got adopted by a millionaire (3), having become accustomed to her new lifestyle, (4), she might now be something of a fancy pants (5). Show it with a defineable moment. This might be a good point for her to drive by the orphanage in her limousine.

"Take" – MEET YOUR MAKER

As you might expect with a circular model like this, there is a lot of symmetry going on, and on the journey back upward, we're going to be doing a lot of referencing to the journey downward.

Just as (1) and (5) are very maternal, feminine, vulnerable moments, (2) and (6) are very paternal, masculine, active moments, regardless of the protagonist's gender.

Think about what really happened at (2). Things were "fine" at (1) but they just weren't quite good enough. That's how we got into this whole mess in the first place.

In *Real Genius* (I'm really drawing on the classics, now), the dorky kid (1) is recruited for a special college program that's working on a powerful laser (2). He becomes the roommate of a wayward genius whose major is how-to-parrrrrtay (3). Party man teaches Dork how to relax while Dork teaches party man how to focus (4) and as a result, they are able to perfect their laser (5) and get their prestigious accolades. But now a second, more honest call to adventure from an uber-nerd who lives in the steam tunnels: What is that laser for? Why did they have to build it to certain specifications? What did that creepy, popcorn-hating professor have in mind? Sure, they could stay here in this pizza parlor, nursing at the tit of their own prosperity. But then again, they didn't get this far by being irresponsible. It's time to start heading back up to the real world and making things right, *Genius* style.

There are major, major consequences to that decision. In fact, in a good action movie, this is where our guy simply gets his ass kicked. Robocop, armed with Clarence Boddiker's confession (5), marches into the office of Dick Jones, CEO of the company that built him. He tries to arrest the man that owns him, only to discover that he can't. It's against his programming. Loveable, human Alex Murphy (2) might have been able to pull this off, but bullet-proof, factory-made Robocop can't. Ironic, considering that Murphy's unconscious wish (2) was to be a bulletproof hero ("TJ Laser"). Between his purely mechanical brother, ED-209, and his purely human brothers, the misinformed police, being sicked on him, Robocop barely makes it out of the father's castle in one piece.

Lest you think moments like this are reserved for action films, let's look at a nearly identical scene, which happens to be in *Network*, which may be the best written film ever made. At this stage of that story, Howard Beale, news anchor turned prophet, is ushered into a board room, where he comes face to face with his creator: CEO of the company that owns the network, Arthur Jensen (played by Ned Beatty). In one of the best written, best performed monologues of the 20th century, Jensen reveals to Beale that capitalism is God, God is capitalism, and having fucked with God, Beale must now atone.

No robots, no explosions, same structure.

That's because this half of the circle has its own road of trials – the road back up. The one down prepares you for the bed of the goddess and the one up prepares you to rejoin the ordinary world.

Having made his peace (5) regarding his marriage, John McClaine now wonders why Hans Gruber, head terrorist, was so desperate for those detonators. He goes back to the roof and discovers that the entire upper portion of the skyscraper is wired to blow. With this realization comes the consequence (6): The giant blonde terrorist – the ED-209 to McClaine's Robocop– descends on him and the two will now battle to the death. Dispatching Blondie is only the first step. The trials on this road come fast and furious. By the time the protagonist gets to (7), the last remaining shreds of his ego will have disappeared and he will have accomplished what Campbell calls the "Atonement with the Father–" The father being this completely non–personal, no–bullshit universe, usually embodied, in action films, by the bad guy (who is often heard to say, in these more arch films, "Nothing personal. Just business.")

In a love story, this is the part where they break up. Now comes the stubble and the dirty dishes and the closed shades. The deep, deep, suicidal depression. The boring relationship with the

supposedly better partner. And finally, the realization that nothing was ever more important than him or her.

When you realize that something is important, really important, to the point where it's more important than YOU, you gain full control over your destiny. In the first half of the circle, you were reacting to the forces of the universe, adapting, changing, seeking. Now you have BECOME the universe. You have become that which makes things happen. You have become a living God.

Depending on the scope of your story, a "living God" might be a guy that can finish changing a tire in the rain. Or, in the case of Die Hard, it might be a guy that can appear on the roof, dispatch terrorists with ease and herd 50 hostages to safety while dodging gunfire from an FBI helicopter.

"Return" – BRINGING IT HOME

For some characters, this is as easy as hugging the scarecrow goodbye and waking up. For others, this is where the extraction team finally shows up and pulls them out– what Campbell calls

"rescue from without." In an anecdote about having to change a flat tire in the rain, this could be the character getting back into his car.

For others, not so easy, which is why Campbell also talks about "The Magic Flight."

The denizens of the deep can't have people sauntering out of the basement any more than the people upstairs wanted you going down there in the first place. The natives of the conscious and unconscious worlds justify their actions however they want, but in the grand scheme, their goal is to keep the two worlds separate, which includes keeping people from seeing one and living to tell about it.

This is a great place for a car chase. Or, in a love story, having realized what's important, the hero bursts out of his apartment onto the sidewalk. His lover's airplane leaves for Antarctica in TEN MINUTES! John McClaine, who at step (1) was afraid of flying, now wraps a fire hose around his waist and leaps off an exploding building, then shoots a giant window so he can kick through it with his bloody feet.

Strangely enough, he will soon find himself back in the same room where the Christmas party was being held.

"Change" – MASTER OF BOTH WORLDS

In an action film, you're guaranteed a showdown here. In a courtroom drama, here comes the disruptive, sky-punching cross examination that leaves the murderer in a tearful confession. In a love story, the man runs across the tarmac, stops the taxiing airplane, gets on board and says to his lover:

"When I first met you, I thought you were perfect. And then I got used to you being perfect, and everything was perfect, but then I found out you weren't perfect, and we broke up, and then I realized, I'm not perfect, either. Nobody's perfect, and I don't want a perfect person, I just want you. Let's move in together. I'll sleep on the wet spot. You can keep your cat, I'll take allergy medicine. And when you're a hundred years old, I'll clean the shit out of your diaper."

And then, of course, the old woman and/or large black man seated next to the love interest looks at her and says, "Well, what are you waiting for? Go to him!"

Why this strange reaction from old women and large black men? Because the protagonist, on whatever scale, is now a world-altering ninja. They have been to the strange place, they have adapted to it, they have discovered true power and now they are back where they started, forever changed and forever capable of creating change. In a love story, they are able to love. In a Kung Fu story, they're able to Kung all of the Fu. In a slasher film, they can now slash the slasher.

One really neat trick is to remind the audience that the reason the protagonist is capable of such behavior is because of what happened down below. When in doubt, look at the opposite side of the circle. Surprise, surprise, the opposite of (8) is (4), the road of trials, where the hero was getting his shit together. Remember that zippo the bum gave him? It blocked the bullet! It's hack, but its hack because it's worked a thousand times. Grab it, deconstruct it, create your own version. You didn't seem to have a problem with that formula when the stuttering guy (4) recited a perfect monologue (8) in Shakespeare in Love. It's all the same. Remember that tribe of crazy, comic relief Indians that we befriended at (4) by kicking their biggest wrestler in the nuts? It is now, at (8), as we are nearly beaten by the bad guy, that those crazy sons of bitches ride over the hill and save us. Why is this not Deus Ex Machina? Because we earned it (4).

Everyone thinks the Matrix was successful because of new, American special effects combined with old Hong Kong bootleg style. Those things didn't hurt, but for an example of how well they deliver on their own, watch the fucking sequel. Admit it, it stinks. The writers of the Matrix say in interviews that they assembled The Matrix from elements of their favorite films. They tried to make the movie that they always wanted to see. Ta da. They surrendered to their instincts, to what they knew worked, and as a result, they did what humans do instinctively: They told an instinctively satisfying story about an everyday guy (1) that gets a weird call (2) and, upon following it, realizes that reality was an illusion (3). He learns the ropes (4), talks to the oracle (5), loses his mentor (6), goes back (7) and saves the fucking day (8). It's not perfect, especially in the third act, but try identifying the steps in Matrix Reloaded. Get a slide rule. And a cup of coffee. It's going to be a long, hard slog.

In Die Hard, having killed every terrorist – each time dropping more and more neurotic luggage, McClaine now stands, unarmed, nearly naked, before his wife. There's only one problem. Hans Gruber, the unconscious shadow version of John (is "Hans" German for "John?"), is also here, having "followed" him up to the ordinary world, as shadows are prone to do. He's got a gun to her head. And, he's got one more goon – you know, the guy that played "Nick

the Dick" in Bachelor Party (who would've thought he'd last the longest?)

Sometimes Boss Hog doesn't stop at the county line. Sometimes the alien sneaks aboard your escape pod, or the T-Rex starts walking through people's back yards. This is especially liable to happen in more action-oriented life and death stories, where the crossing of the return threshold was down and dirty. Things can get sloppy. You can drag a little more chaos than you wanted through the portal. Worlds can collide. Like Ulysses, coming home to find 50 guys trying to bang his wife, it's time to clean house.

Fortunately, the real John has spent his story time learning new behaviors, while Shadow John has spent his story time attempting to cling to his crumbling ego. Real John has learned, in particular, that sometimes your best offense is surrender. He came around the corner with his otherworldly submachine gun, and was ordered to drop it. Now Shadow John, at (8) thinks he has what was so desperately necessary to Real John at (1): Control. He has John's wife as an unwilling hostage. And, of course, like a good villain, Hans would never dream of throwing away the opportunity to gloat as he levels his gun on John.

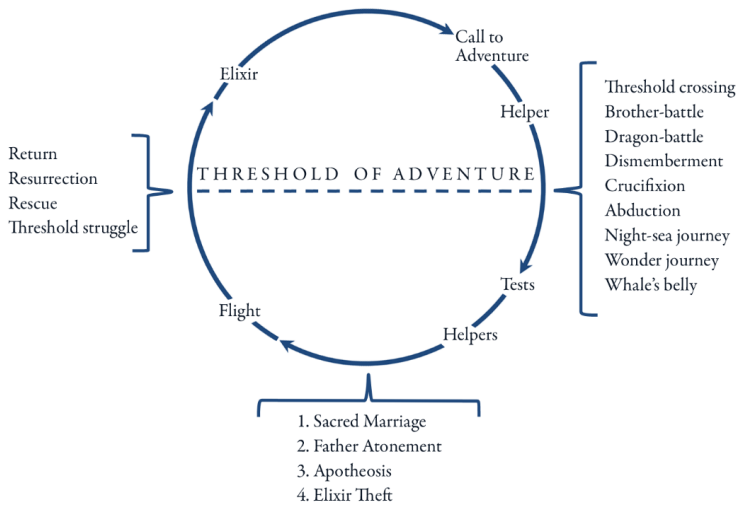
But John's SMG was empty. He had placed his last two bullets from the unconscious world back into his old, conscious, New York penis pistol, the one he had on the plane, the one that is now taped to his back with...(blush) Christmas tape. Okay, look, it's a pretty good script up until that point. Anyways, John pulls the concealed gun, shoots Shadow John through his black, uncompromising, German heart, shoots Nick the Dick in the forehead, and, as his wife and Hans nearly both tumble through the broken window, John is able to release his love once and for all by releasing the clasp on the Rolex given to her by an L.A. cokehead yuppie. The watch, and Hans, tumble through the air, the principal from Breakfast Club says "I hope that's not a hostage," and so concludes the 20th century's greatest action film.

Well, not quite. The proper, jive talking, submissive, comic relief black chauffeur has to punch out the improper, hyper-intelligent, uppity black computer hacker, thereby making slavery more heroic than terrorism and restoring security to Caucasian society. Also, the child-murdering, gun-shy L.A. cop has to blow away the freshly resurrected Blonde terrorist, reacquainting himself with the fact that sometimes, killing the right type of person can be a life affirming act.

Meanwhile, our tire-changing hero starts his car and heads home, with a story to tell his wife.

A good story? Worthy of TV or movies? Of course not. But the tire-changing story uses the barest minimums. Contrast it with one in which, after the man pulls his car to the side of the road, a werewolf opens the door and eats him. The end. Now, you have one sequence with a werewolf in it and one without. Which tells a story? It doesn't matter how cool you think werewolves are, you know the answer instinctively.

You know all of this instinctively. You are a storyteller. You were born that way.



105:

How TV is Different

Television really is no different, except in one, very practical sense:

A feature film's job is to send you out of the theater on a high in 90 minutes. Television's job is to keep you glued to the television for your entire life.

This does not entail making stories any less circular (TV circles are so circular they're sometimes irritatingly predictable). It just means

that the focus of step (8) is less riling-things-up and more getting-things-back-to-where-they-started.

Movies can afford to blow up the Death Star at the end. In a sitcom version of Star Wars, however, the protagonist would be a desk clerk working in the hangar bay at Rebel headquarters. In a dramatic series, he'd be an X-wing pilot constantly making raids on the Death Star. But note that in both the sitcom and dramatic TV version of Star Wars, the Death Star stays. If not, the show would end.

The pilot episode of a TV show usually tells the story of a person entering a new situation. New job, new marriage, divorce, just got out of college, adopted a black person, started spinning cities, sainting elsewheres or willing graces. I'd be really bad at examples because the only TV I watch is the show my friend is on, "Happy Family." In that show's pilot, the baby boomer husband and wife realize, for the first time, that no matter how old your kids get, they never stop being your kids. The "new" situation can be as simple as that, a realization, a theme, the thing that your show is about.

In a larger scope, a TV pilot is giving us (1), (2) and (3), then encouraging us to tune in and watch (4) for the rest of time. But that's looking at the entire run of the show as a single story.

Within the scope of an individual episode, pilot or not, you still have to run a full circle:

1. I
2. notice a small problem,
3. and make a major decision.
4. this changes things
5. to some satisfaction, but
6. there are consequences
7. that must be undone
8. and I must admit the futility of change.

Uninspiring? Yes, but the joy of TV is in the moment. TV isn't selling revolution, it's selling a hygienic, relatable substitution for your own filthy, unmarketable humanity. The stories are just killing time while the voices and faces wear a groove in your brain and the commercials do their hard, hard work.

But notice how, being required to keep our attention, they have to do so with that circular structure. If we don't get that circle, we'll flip to the next channel.

The characters must start in the ordinary situation, descend into a new situation, adapt to it, become native to it, pay the price and then flock back to basics having "changed."

The trick that television plays is that it swaps out any meaningful and therefore potentially television-subverting truth with the basic, eternal "truth" that change is unnecessary. "What did you learn today, Beaver?" Well, basically, Dad, I learned to never do anything. "Good boy."

There's nothing sinister about the intent, the intent is just to save money on sets and keep scripts relatively modular. You're the one that wanted a capitalist society. Welcome to the overhead-reducing, profit-maximizing techniques of storytelling for money.

106:

Five Minute Pilots

When I talk about "story structure" I'm talking about something very scientific, like "geometry." Your story could have "perfect" structure, in that it hits all the resonant points craved by the audience mind, but that won't make it a perfect piece of entertainment. Example:

Once upon a time, there was a thirsty man on a couch. He got up off the couch, went to his kitchen, searched through his refrigerator, found a soda, drank it, and returned to his couch, thirst quenched.

That was "perfect story structure." On the other hand, the story sucked.

Here's a converse example:

Once upon a time, a car exploded. A Navy Seal killed a werewolf. Two beautiful naked women had sex with each other, then a robot shot the moon with a Jesus-powered laser. The world became overpopulated by zombies. The End.

Lot of exciting, creative stuff happening, but very little structure. Again, boo, but the lesbian scene did give me a boner.

What do you want? You want both. You want to be cool, but you're going to be cooler if the structure is there. Cool stuff with no structure is like that perfect scene you recorded when you left the lens cap on. "Guess you had to be there." Show me an army of zombies and I might say "cool zombies," but I'm not going to "be there."

You also want to make sure everything's lit well, and that the audio is clear, and that the edits are well-timed, and it would be great if you had fantastic actors and a makeup artist and a million other ingredients. But we are not talking about makeup right now, or lighting, acting, editing, or how to come up with cool ideas. We're focusing on one very particular aspect of a video: Its structure, the

geometry of its story. A little bit helps a little, a lot helps a *lot*, having none can cripple you.

The thing about Channel 101 that makes it really easy to analyze structure in action: The five minute time limit. That's 300 seconds, 75 seconds per story quarter, 37.5 per step. And what are those steps? Class?

1. You
2. Need
3. Go
4. Search
5. Find
6. Take
7. Return
8. Change

As I've said, the easiest way to visualize these steps is by drawing a circle, dividing it into 4 equal pieces, and writing numbers around it clockwise, with (1) and (5) at the north and south "poles" of the circle, (3) and (7) at the east and west poles.

1. **"You"** – who are we? A squirrel? The sun? A red blood cell? America? By the end of the first 37 seconds, we'd really like to know.
2. **"Need"** – something is wrong, the world is out of balance. This is the reason why a story is going to take place. The "you" from (1) is an alcoholic. There's a dead body on the floor. A motorcycle gang rolls into town. Campbell phrases: Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Supernatural Aid.
3. **"Go"** – For (1) and (2), the "you" was in a certain situation, and now that situation changes. A hiker heads into the woods. Pearl Harbor's been bombed. A mafia boss enters therapy. Campbell phrase: Crossing of the Threshold. Syd Field phrase: Plot Point 1.
4. **"Search"** – adapting, experimenting, getting shit together, being broken down. A detective questions suspects. A cowboy gathers his posse. A cheerleader takes a nerd shopping. Campbell phrases: Belly of the Whale, Road of Trials. Christopher Vogler phrase: Friends, Enemies and Allies.
5. **"Find"** – whether it was the direct, conscious goal or not, the "need" from (2) is fulfilled. We found the princess. The suspect gives the location of the meth lab. A nerd achieves

popularity. Campbell phrase: Meeting with the Goddess. Syd Field phrase: mid-point. Vogler phrase: Approach to the Innermost Cave.

6. **"Take"** – The hardest part (both for the characters and for anyone trying to describe it). On one hand, the price of the journey. The shark eats the boat. Jesus is crucified. The nice old man has a stroke. On the other hand, a goal achieved that we never even knew we had. The shark now has an oxygen tank in his mouth. Jesus is dead– oh, I get it, flesh doesn't matter. The nice old man had a stroke, but before he died, he wanted you to take this belt buckle. Now go win that rodeo. Campbell phrases: Atonement with the Father, Death and Resurrection, Apotheosis. Syd Field phrase: plot point 2
7. **"Return"** – It's not a journey if you never come back. The car chase. The big rescue. Coming home to your girlfriend with a rose. Leaping off the roof as the skyscraper explodes. Campbell phrases: Magic Flight, Rescue from Without, Crossing of the Return Threshold.
8. **"Change"** – The "you" from (1) is in charge of their situation again, but has now become a situation-changer. Life will never be the same. The Death Star is blown up. The couple is in love. Dr. Bloom's Time Belt is completed. Lorraine

Bracco heads into the jungle with Sean Connery to "find some of those ants." Campbell phrases: Master of Both Worlds, Freedom to Live.

Again, said differently: If we assume you're going to use your full 5 minutes, then you've got 1 minute and 15 seconds to for these 3 steps:

Get the audience to identify with someone or something.

Give that someone or something some kind of need,

Start changing the circumstances.

You've then got another 1:15 to:

Have that someone or something deal with the new circumstances.

Find the thing that was needed.

You've got another 1:15 to:

Have that someone or something pay the price of the find.

Start heading back toward the original circumstances.

And a final 1:15 to:

Show how those original circumstances have changed as a result.

In TV, that last quarter is a good time to make it very clear to the audience that you've got a series in mind. More can happen. As a "situation changer," your protagonist is going to be going on more journeys (episodes), creating a viable series or "franchise."

You want to go nuts? Think of each of the 8 steps as consisting of 8 microcosmic sub-steps. Because the act of:

1. Establishing a protagonist

could be done by showing a guy on a couch for 4 seconds, showing a closeup of his face looking thirsty for 4 seconds, and so on until you've spent 37.5 seconds telling the "story of the guy that drank a soda." Then you could go on to

2. Establish a need

By telling the 37.5 second story of "the guy whose soda turned out to contain poison:"

- (2.1) The guy [you]
- (2.2) Makes a stink face [need]
- (2.3) Starts inspecting the soda can [go]

- (2.4) Runs finger over ingredients [search]
- (2.5) Finds "poison" in ingredients [find]
- (2.6) Chokes [take]
- (2.7) Falls down [return]
- (2.8) Dead [change]

It's all in the context of step 2, but cycling through a mini-circle. Then you could tell the 37.5 second story of him going to heaven, followed by the story of him asking around for God, the story of him finding God, the story of God telling him he can only go back to Earth if he agrees to be a dog, etc.

I'm not recommending that you sit there with a compass and a calculator breaking down your story to the point where every 4 second line of dialogue consists of 8 syllables and tells the story of a sentence, but it's possible and sometimes "going there" can help you make decisions or get unblocked.

On the other hand, you can also just shotgun it. So what if you have to spend an extra 11 seconds making the audience love your main character, at the price of some time from other sections of the story? So what if, in today's world, we really don't need to spend a

proportionate amount of time saying "happily ever after," at the expense of less karate? Nobody's going to notice. A confidently hand drawn, vaguely egg-shaped circle can be circular enough.

You won't win any prizes for being the Phillip Glass of story structure, especially if it starts compromising your creativity. Follow your bliss. If you know what to do, do it. That's called creativity. If you don't know what to do, *then* listen to some guy like me telling you what you *have* to do.

Okay, that's the review of my story model.

FAQ

Why do stories have to follow this structure?

It's not that stories have to follow this structure, it's that, without some semblance of this structure, it's not recognizable as a story.

I learned about "iconography" from working with Rob Schrab for several years. In cartooning, you have to draw a certain combination

of lines before the audience is going to universally recognize what you've drawn.

If I draw a cylinder, I can tell you it's a banana, but I can't make you think "banana" on your own unless I make it yellow, taper the ends and give it some curvature. To further extend this metaphor:

Sometimes bananas are green in real life. If I make a green, tapered, curved cylinder, does it look like a banana? It looks like a pepper. You can jump up and down and scream about how you just drew a perfectly good banana, because it looks just as much like a real banana as a yellow one (student filmmaker), but I'm telling you, dude, it's a fucking pepper, *until* you put more time and energy into giving it *other* recognizable banana qualities— for instance, drawing it half peeled. Okay, now it's a green banana. You blew my mind.

Likewise, I'm saying there's 8 steps to "drawing" a universally recognizable story. Can you skip some of them? Yep. I do it all the time. The "road of trials" in Call me Cobra is a guy sitting down at a table. If I had an extra 30 seconds, I would have written that Steve tries on different outfits and personas, saying "I'm the Cobra" in a mirror before deciding on his black suit and going to his meeting with the goddess. But I skipped it. It's implied. The time was needed elsewhere.

Yeah, but why would a human being recognize certain things as stories? I mean, with a banana, we need to know it's a banana so that we know we can eat it. We don't "eat" stories.

Yes we do, and our survival as individuals and as communities is dependent on recognizing the edible, nutritious ones. Information can be "empty calories," like a phone book, or it can be downright "poisonous," like a Super Bowl halftime show, a Madonna video or footage of a man blowing his brains out. The right kinds of poison can get you high and help you have fun, but it's getting you high because it's fucking with you, it's killing you, and if you don't occasionally eat real story food— a dramatic game of football where your favorite team wins, a meaningful conversation with friends you trust, a good book, a good movie, a good TV show, witnessing a life being saved at the public pool— you are going to wither away and die, psychologically, spiritually and socially speaking.

But I'm sick and tired of cookie-cutter stories about good guys saving the day from bad guys. Some of my favorite movies fly in the face of your story model.

If it's really your favorite movie, I absolutely guarantee you it's structured at least somewhat in accordance with this model. You're hearing "good guys and bad guys," but I'm not saying it. I'm saying "protagonist descending and returning."

The very fact that you ARE sick of ordinary movies is evidence that we live and breathe this structure. If you're a subversive punk rock anarchist with a spike through your nose, and you hate "Shrek" because it's a piece of corporate shit, you are craving a descent into the unknown. "You" are expressing a "need" to "go" to an obscure film magazine, "search" for something unique, "find" a gory Japanese horror film, "take" it, "return" to your apartment with it and use it to "change" your friends' minds about cinema. And I think you

will find that your "favorite" Japanese gore fest is the one with a recognizable protagonist needing to eat human flesh, going to an orgy, eating everyone there, raping a woman, killing the police and jumping out the window before heading into the night.

Schrab has this video we watch all the time: It's an orientation video designed to teach mentally retarded girls about their period. The protagonist is a retarded girl. She starts asking questions about periods. She's led into a bathroom by her older sister, and after a very uncomfortable road of trials, things take a turn for the bizarre. I won't go into detail. Not only is the protagonist going on a journey, the audience is, too.

I have taken great pains to avoid any ethical positioning in my observations of structure. Stories are not necessarily about love conquering all, they're not about achieving spiritual balance, they're not about "learning valuable life lessons" and they're not about maintaining order. They're about change. Subversion of order. By the way, "Shrek" had not-so-good structure.

Good structure is the best weapon we can use in the fight against corporate garbage because good structure costs nothing, is instinctive to the individual and important to the audience. For all their money, computers and famous actors, the Hollywood factory is

constantly being challenged and often buried by individuals like you, people who started by realizing that they were sick of the shit they were seeing and wrote a good story from the deepest level of their unconscious mind. I am trying to show you how to make your own gunpowder. You can use it to make pretty fireworks or you can use it to blow up a building full of innocent babies, it's not my place to care.

If this stuff is instinctive, why does it have to be "taught?"

Because we don't live in the real world anymore. We are not in tune with our instincts. Babies know how to swim when they're born but some adults sink like a stone until another adult shows them some moves.

If you're so great, why haven't you written anything good?

Isn't that always the way? I'm not a great writer. I'm just a guy that's been obsessed with story structure for the last seven years, non stop. Like I said at the beginning, perfect structure is not synonymous with "good show." This is about what audiences recognize as stories, not about how to be a good writer.

I disagree with your model, I don't think all stories are required to do this or that.

Prove me wrong. It'd be a great exercise. Don't have a protagonist. Or do have one, but don't give [it] a need. Or have a protagonist with a need whose circumstances never change. Or have a protagonist with a need enter a new set of circumstances, fail to adapt and never find what they needed. Or have them do everything but return. The first lesson you'll learn is that it's pretty hard to actively defy this story model. As soon as you get in the zone and you're writing something that's making you happy, you're going to realize with horror that you've accidentally nailed one of the story steps at exactly the right time.