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Worldbuilding Ep. 008: Plot Part One, Shapes and Structure

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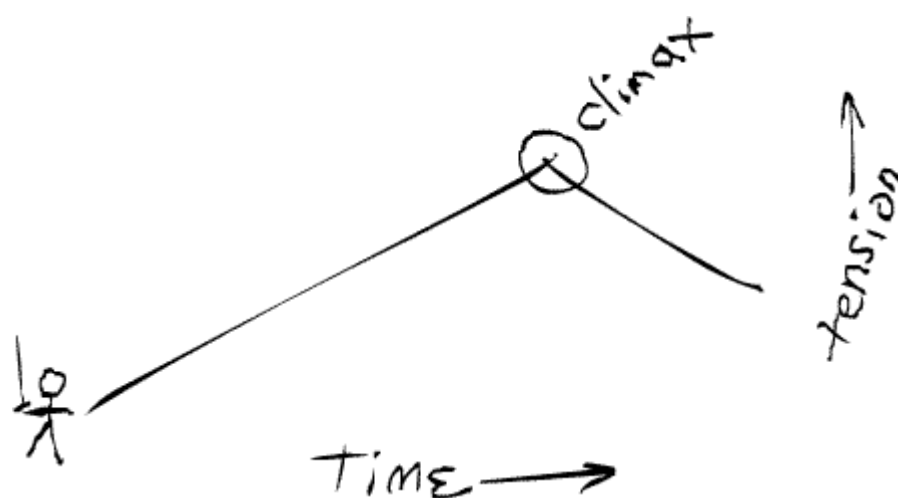
Worldbuilding Episode 008 Show Notes

Thinking about the plot structures through which the characters experience your invented world will help you understand the overall feel and design of the world. For example, if you want the players to feel trapped or isolated (as in a horror game) you will probably migrate to using more constrained plots like the funnel web or onion. If you want your players to feel a sense of freedom and wonder, you would probably structure your plots in geographic spatial arrangements...

Plot Shapes

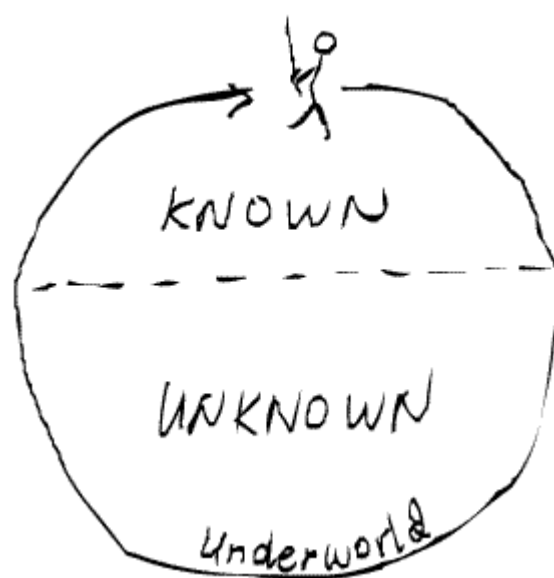
Freytag's Triangle

Freytag's concept of a plot shape was a triangle in which characters moved in time along a horizontal axis, as well as upward along a vertical axis (representing the tension in the story) toward a final climax, which was the point of greatest tension where the conflicts were finally resolved. After this peak, the story wound down through a resolution where the final story threads were completed.



Campbell's Monomyth (or Hero Journey)

The classic pattern of the Hero Journey (derived from ancient mythic stories like Gilgamesh and The Odyssey) involves an epic hero (a character with the innate ability to make the world better or to right a major source of disorder in the world) who moves around a circular shape that represents his or her life journey, trials and growth. Several archetypal patterns recur in the Hero Journey, such as the threshold (a kind of doorway into new worlds or locations that oftentimes includes a threshold guardian), other archetypal characters such as helpers, mentors and supernatural aids, an abyss (either Hell or some variant of Hell), a return home with a boon for the world, rebirth, atonement and other concepts that we'll return to in a later episode.



Up-plot

The plot ends with the heroes emphatically winning.

Down-plot

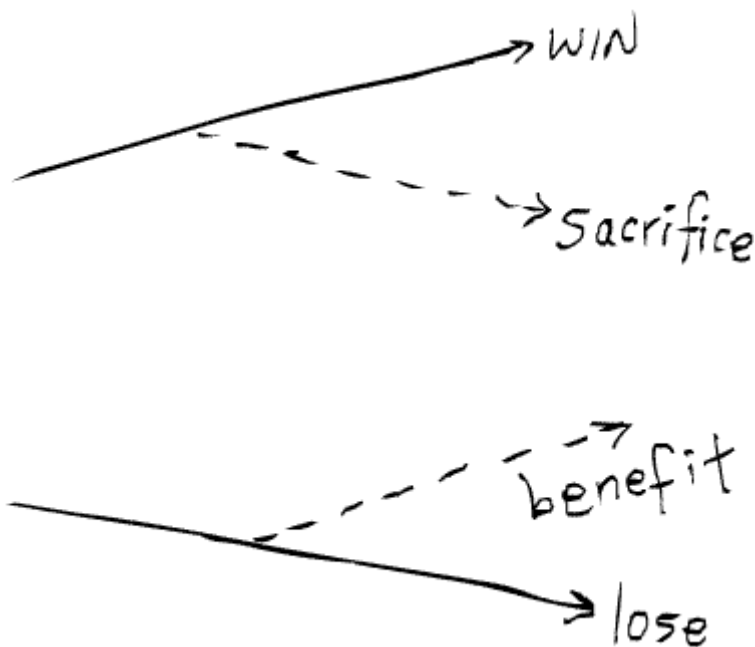
The plot ends with the heroes losing.

Ironic variation (up-down)

The heroes win but with a great sacrifice. Their success is tainted with an ironic price.

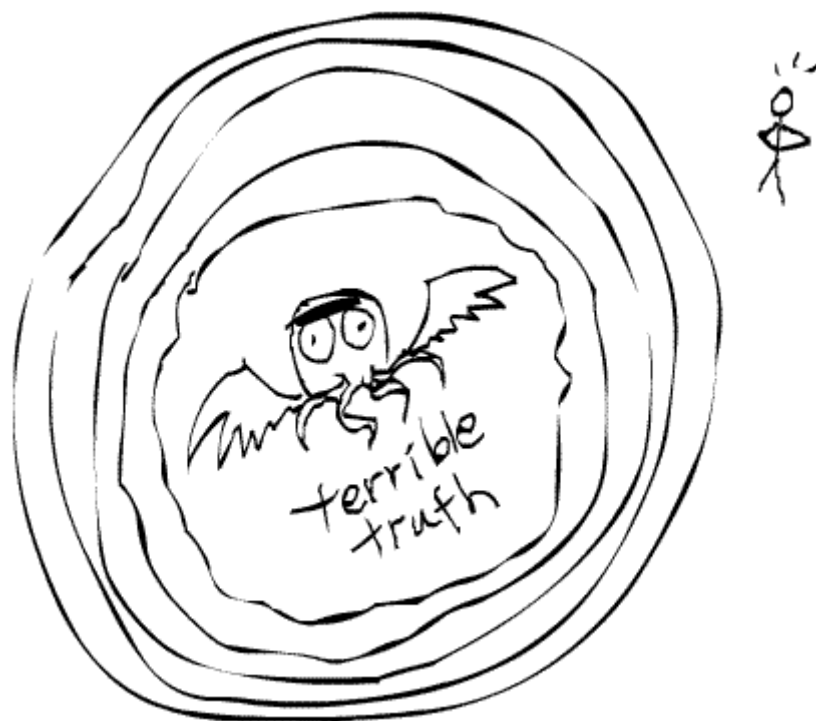
Ironic variation (down-up)

The heroes lose but with an unanticipated gain. The heroes don't get what they initially wanted, but they do get something that they didn't know they needed or wanted.



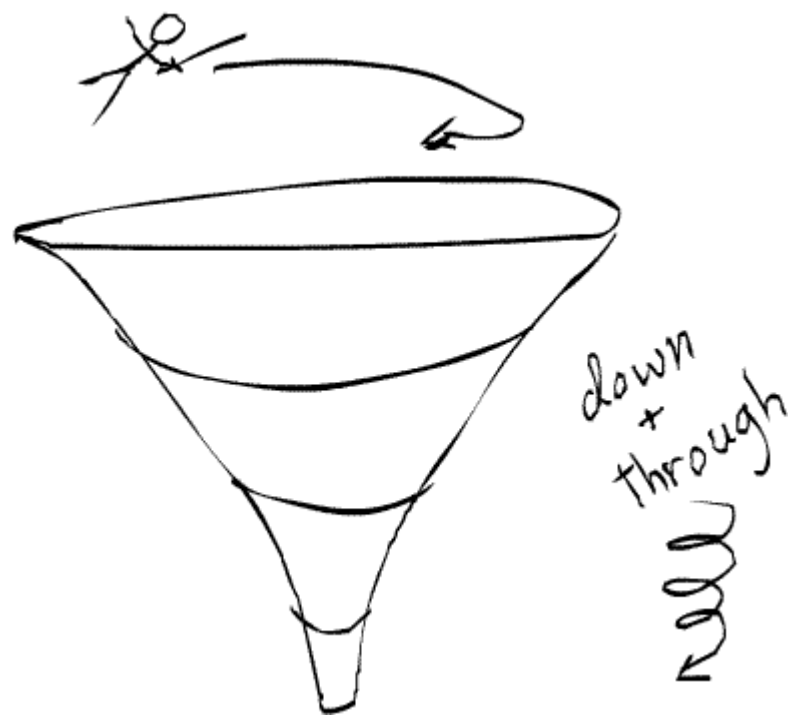
The "Onion"

The plot is shaped like an onion, with the story beginning on the outer layer. The characters have freedom to move around this outer layer, attempting to find any of the scattered clues left around this layer that can lead them deeper inward to the next layer. The characters need to peel back the layers one by one to find some "truth" in the middle. An interesting shape that lends itself well to interactive stories that involve a mystery (think: *Call of Cthulhu* scenarios...)



Funnel Web (The Inferno Shape)

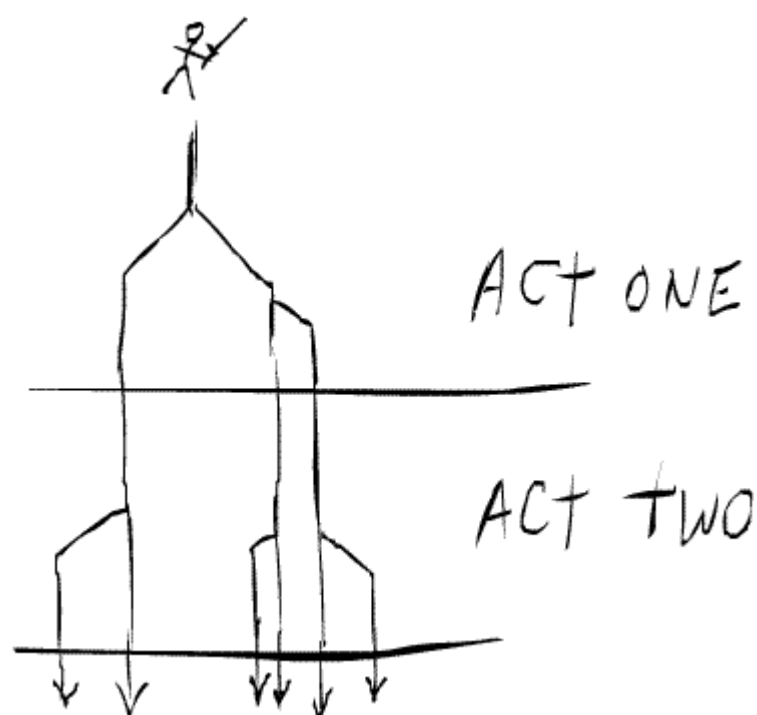
Based on Dante's conception of Hell, the heroes begin on the funnel's lip and can only move downward and around in a spiral toward the horrible center. Similar to the Onion, but trapping the characters in a downward progression. The only way out is down and through...



Puzzle Chart—"The Fork"

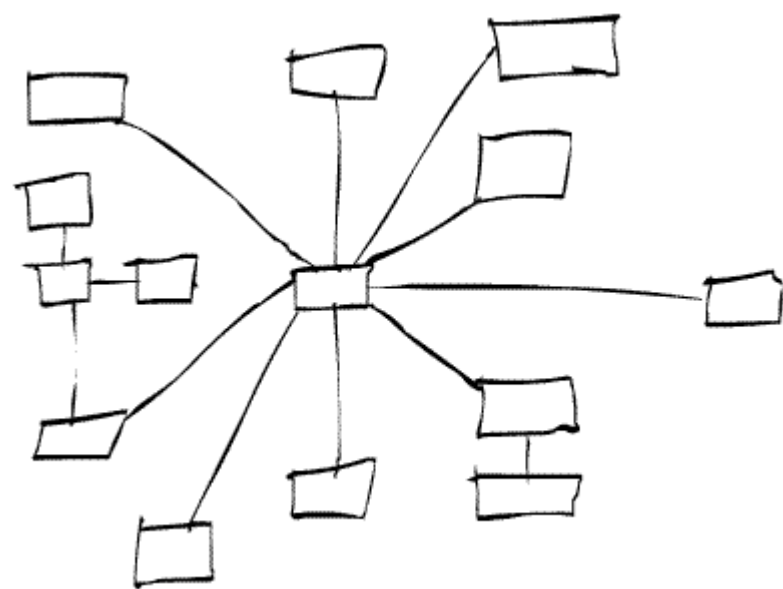
[Download and play Michael Gentry's Anchorhead](#) for a great example of a game that uses this type of design. Characters begin at the top of the chart and progress downward (or vice versa). They are constrained to a multitude of paths that must be completed (in any order) before the story's next act (and time) moves forward.

This is a nice structure for more puzzle-oriented stories, but can also be used as a device to structure dramatic events. For instance, a villain might not appear to the heroes until they have solved three other mysteries that need to be explored before the act's climax (and the villain) is reached.



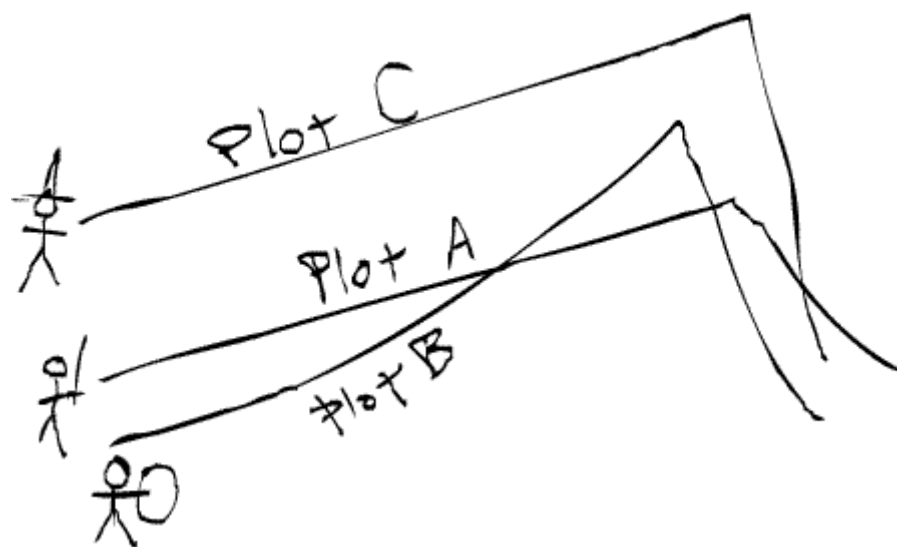
Geographic/Spatial

Less of a structure and more of an open map in which events are scattered around, each connected by an underlying story or meaning. As the events are triggered one by one in any order, the story's real meaning is uncovered and pieced together.



The Multiplot

Each hero's story is mapped as a different plotline that parallels and crisscrosses the other hero plotlines.



Episodic

The plot is a series of smaller Freytag triangles, each culminating in a cliffhanger and climax. Once the tension is resolved, the heroes move into a new episode.

There are many other variations of external structure that we can tackle later. In Robert McKee's book (*Story*) he defines: the Fairy Tale Structure; The Mythic Structure; The Outlaw Structure, among others. There are Surreal Structures, Antiplots, and so on. You can also combine structures within worlds to find new ways of exploring story.

In an interactive or collaborative story, there is obviously more than one author, as the players become authors of their characters' lives. But the game master can still cleverly constrain the players to a structure. Although structure does disallow certain freedoms, the benefit is the ability to orchestrate dramatic tension and thematic movements within the world, and to set up triggers for human drama. If carefully planned (and with the right structure), these moments can happen and still leave the players with an illusion of freedom.

Basic Elements of Plot

Characters who stand for something (want something)

I talked about this in Episode 7.

Conflict! The Engine of the Story

Something needs to "get in the characters way" of getting what they want. And often. The author or game master creates a series of complications that continually frustrate the characters from reaching their desires (but not impossible complications!)

Conflict is Derived from the Forces of Antagonism

1. Man versus man
2. Man versus nature
3. Man versus himself
4. Man versus society
5. And some variations (Man versus God; Man versus Supernatural...)

And just as characters and character types emerge from your thematic questions and subjects, so too does your conflict types. In *24*, a show about the dilemma of loyalty to an ideal and the complications involved with those loyalties, the character conflicts will be against others with differing loyalties, governments with different agendas, complications that put the characters into situations where they must choose between opposing loyalties, antagonists who are fanatics to their causes, zealots, and so on.

In *Monk*, a show about order, the character Monk—who is always trying to control his world and make it conform to his will—must constantly battle against people who disrupt that order, either by comically messing up his life, or through the murders he must solve to piece together—through logic—the mystery, and put the world back to its natural state. And the overarching plot is the murder of his wife, a force of chaos that even he cannot solve.

Exposition

The beginning of your story that, at the very least, reveals the characters and what they want, and the major conflicts that must be resolved by the story's end.

Complications

Problems specifically catered to the characters' desires, needs, flaws and philosophy about life.

Reversals (Ironic Twists)

When the characters reach certain points in the plotline, a reversal is used to reveal a new truth that is usually the opposite of what the characters anticipated (examples: the villain is not the real villain; the goal of the villain is not what the heroes anticipated; one of the heroes is really one of the villains; the heroes rescue the villagers, only to be villified for their actions instead of deified; the contact person who is feeding the heroes information is really a spy, or has been murdered, and so on). These are surprises, and they help increase the tension and drama in the story.

The Macguffin (not essential to Plot, but a useful device nonetheless)

A contrived cheat, some object or objective to get the characters moving in the plot. The Macguffin is inessential beyond its use as a plot device to motivate the characters into action. Example: the suitcase in *Pulp Fiction*, or the stolen money in *Psycho*.

Plot Structure will be continued in Part Two!

Next episode, I'll take these elements of plot and talk about how these fit with the other elements we've talked about (tone, thematic subject, conflicting characters) and put everything together by breaking down a popular film to show how a director juggles these pieces. I'll even bring in other elements that are related to the plot structure and thematic subjects such as visual motifs, music, and design.

Instead of a Suggested Worldbuilding Activity: "The World in a Box" Contest Ideas

A contest idea came up and has been kicked around in the forums. Keith Curtis and ReccaSquirrel has both contributed ideas to this subject (and the World in a Box idea initially came from ReccaSquirrel). What do you guys think about this idea:

"The World in a Box One Shot Adventure Contest"

Players are given or choose a genre, seed and range of players, and then develop a one-shot adventure (like a 10-20 pager) that a group could pick up and play in a two-hour sitting to completion. The idea is to let them learn about your world through dramatic play. And it would be rule-light, so that different systems could be integrated if needed (maybe even CHUPA or D20-whatever). This adventure might be the seed that could potentially become a larger world (like Ravenloft originally).

We could do an all genre variation, or we could even give everyone a similar genre and parameters (such as during Halloween we all develop a horror one-shot).

Now that I've said this, I'm thinking about time constraints on all of us, but this is an idea that might potentially take off and I'd like to hear feedback.



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Good Stuff

- Coming soon!

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