**5**

# Story & Character Development
## creating the narrative

### Key Chapter Questions

- How do *story elements* in games differ from those in films and other entertainment media?

- What are some traditional *story structures* and *character archetypes*?

- What is *interactivity* and how can it be applied to storytelling?

- What are some dramatic storytelling devices used in games, and how do they affect *immersion*?

- What are the different forms of *character development,* and how do they specifically apply to game characters??

Where do game ideas come from? Why do these ideas seem compelling enough to get produced? Why do they succeed or fail? This chapter focuses on the process of putting story ideas into practice—applying traditional storytelling structure and character archetypes to game-specific devices. What sort of impact can game characters have on the player? The importance of characters in a game environment can add a personal dimension to a player's experience. Unlike characters in other entertainment media, game characters can interact directly with the player—who might also play a character role. This chapter also introduces all aspects of game character development—including how characters look, act, move, feel, and communicate. It's important to note that the most powerful storytelling device involves what the player experiences while playing the game. This is the gameplay itself, discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

# Storytelling Traditions

Cave paintings were flat, 2D images that told simple stories without words or sound. This was the beginning of the visual storytelling tradition, which has evolved into the visual media of today—including film, television, art, and interactive entertainment. Games form a significant proportion of the highly visual medium of interactive entertainment; this medium incorporates the visual storytelling tradition, but it has also revolutionized the way stories are told. Other storytelling traditions (including oral, audio, and text) have also been folded into the game medium—as music, sound effects, voiceover narration and dialogue, player-to-player chat, and onscreen text dialogue.

Valroe (Wikipedia Commons)

Cave paintings (Lascaux, France, shown) are considered the first examples of visual storytelling.

## Story is Primal

*"We tell each other stories in order to live."* This memorable quote has guided me through many years of educational game and simulation development. Without storytelling, it is hard to inspire and excite. There are clearly game experiences that work without story—but my sense is that storytelling will continue to become a much larger component of game design, and this will broaden the target audience for all types of games significantly.

—*Bjorn Billhardt (Founder & Chief Executive Officer, Enspire Learning)*

Story is primal in nature. It is one of the most innate characteristics that we as humans possess. We are compelled to tell them and are captivated while listening. Story is what allows us to empathize with a character; and without empathy, we could not find the allure to care about them.

—*Bill Buckley (Animator, Neversoft Entertainment)*

# Generating Ideas

Without reading further into this chapter and delving into story structure and unique features of the game storytelling process, consider how story ideas are generated. You've heard the phrase "write what you know." That's a start. But if we all wrote what we knew, there would not be anything but stories based on real-world events—and there certainly would not be fantasy, science fiction, or horror stories! How would we ever experience the fantastic or the surreal: aliens taking over the earth, superheroes that can fly "faster than a speeding bullet," time machines, parallel universes?

Writers often get ideas from thoughts that just come to them throughout the day. These ideas could be anything from observations of the people and the environment around them to portions of dreams they remember from the previous night. Direct personal experience is another common idea generator. Have you ever been in a difficult situation and had to do some clever problem solving to "escape" from it? Do you know anyone who's unusual or eccentric (and you caught yourself thinking, "This person would make a great character in a story!")? What was it like for you growing up?

In *Spider: The Secret of Bryce Manor*, the player is a spider who must "play detective" to uncover a mystery surrounding an abandon mansion while frequently spinning webs in order to capture enough food to survive.

You can also be inspired from stories that already exist. What are your favorite movies, television programs, plays, and books? What was it about these stories that involved you emotionally? Have you come upon interesting news stories? You might be inspired by a television situation comedy, such as *Seinfeld,* to create a game that involves ordinary characters in ordinary situations. Or you might be inspired by a musical, such as *Moulin Rouge*, to create a game in which the characters sing!

::::: Adaptations

Existing movies, books, plays, and television shows can inspire you to create original games. But if you decide to do a direct adaptation of a pre-existing work, you need to clear the subsidiary rights with the copyright owner and make a licensing deal. This can be rather expensive—and these rights are often already taken. For example, Electronic Arts and Vivendi Universal have made deals with New Line Cinema and the estate of J. R. R. Tolkien, respectively, to create games based on the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

*Ghostbusters: The Video Game* is a game adaptation of the *Ghostbusters* film.

Start carrying a notebook with you at all times so that you can jot down any ideas that come to mind throughout the day. Make sure you use the notebook only for this purpose—not for writing down "to do" lists or contact information. If you get into this habit, you'll start to notice that you have many creative ideas. The tough part will be transforming them into good game storylines.

## Marianne Krawczyk on the Challenge of Writing for Games :::::

MK

Marianne Krawczyk
(Writer, Monkeyshines Entertainment)

After writing professionally for several years, Marianne Krawczyk got her break when her first feature, *Popular Myth*, was quickly optioned. Moving onto the hit Saturday morning show *Sweet Valley High*, she learned the ins and outs of the writers' room. Marianne focused even more of her attention on writing for children and was hired to write and develop the animated project *Swamp & Tad* for Wild Brain Studios. Later that same year, she wrote *Caffeine* (a pilot based on the comic book series of the same name) for Studios USA/Universal Television and, in January 2005, she wrote a story for the animated series *Bratz*. Taking the knowledge and experience from her career in traditional storytelling, Marianne has successfully made the transition into the world of video games, using her understanding of the delicate relationship between story and gameplay. She wrote the story for Sony's highly acclaimed first-party AAA title *God of War* and was tapped again for *God of War 2*. Since her foray into video games, Marianne has written and story-designed for several games, including *Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code*, *Field Commander*, *The Sopranos: Road to Respect*, and *Area 51*. Marianne is first author of *Game Story & Character Development*, part of the *Game Development Essentials* series.

Good writing is always challenging. You need interesting twists, truthful characters who drive stories, and compelling worlds. If writing were easy, every film would be a blockbuster, every TV show a hit, every game a 500,000-unit seller. Obviously, this isn't the case.

Introducing game design into how stories are told is a whole new challenge. To further complicate matters, good stories are linear, while games are not. A common mistake is to start out with something complicated that will only get more so throughout the process of creating a game. Negotiating a simple, direct story in a world that is designed to drift sideways is difficult— but, ironically, it's probably a better metaphor for life itself than the medium of film.

# Classic Character Archetypes

Why do we tell stories? Noted psychologist Carl Jung explains the reason for storytelling in terms of the *collective unconscious*: a knowledge we are all born with and yet can never be directly conscious of. Within this collective unconscious are universal themes and *archetypes*, which appear in our culture in the form of stories and character types in art, literature, music, film, and games. Jung's collective unconscious forms the basis for our connection to certain universal character types. These archetypes are used in all entertainment media to heighten the audience's connection to the story.

## Hero

Nintendo

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. Later in this chapter, you'll learn about Campbell's "hero's journey" *monomyth* and the process by which the hero transforms during this classical story form. The hero is always presented with a problem toward the beginning of the story and embarks on a physical or emotional journey



Link is the hero in *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*.

to eventually solve this problem. The hero performs most of the action in a story and assumes the majority of risk and responsibility. Luke Skywalker is a classic example of a hero character.

## Shadow

Eidos

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. This was explored symbolically in Robert Louis Stevenson's classic, *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde.* Darth Vader is another example of a shadow character—



The Joker (from *Batman: Arkham Asylum*) is a shadow character.

someone who has gone completely over to the dark side.

## Mentor

Electronic Arts



Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* is a mentor who trains the player character.

The *mentor* is a character who often guides the hero toward some action. In this chapter, you'll learn that the mentor character provides the hero with the information needed to embark on the hero's journey. The mentor is 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. Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda are examples of mentor characters. In the *Civilization* series, the advisors (military, domestic, culture, science) provide warnings and hints to the player. Sometimes a mentor character gives bad advice to the hero—deliberately leading the hero down the wrong path. In the tutorial for *Black & White*, a devilish advisor gives only evil advice to the player.

## 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. Han Solo and Chewbacca from the *Star Wars* franchise are examples of allies.

Capcom



Sheva Alomar is an ally in *Resident Evil 5*.

Deep Silver



A guardian (the Inquisitor) in *Sacred 2: Fallen Angel* attempts to block the player character from reaching a goal.

## Guardian

The *guardian* blocks the progress of the hero by whatever means necessary—until the hero has proven his or her worth. A classic guardian character is the sphinx who guards the gates of Thebes in the Greek play *Oedipus.* For the hero (Oedipus) to gain access to Thebes, he must answer the famous riddle posed by the sphinx. 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. Examples of these characters include C3PO and R2D2. These characters can be the hero's sidekicks or even a shadow character.

Electronic Arts



Glados is a trickster character in *Portal 2*.

## Herald

The *herald* facilitates change in the story and provides the hero with direction. An example of a herald character is Princess Leia, whose call for help motivates Luke Skywalker to take action toward a specific goal.

Nintendo



Princess Zelda repeatedly triggers Link's actions in the *The Legend of Zelda* series (*The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, shown).

## Protagonist

In addition to Jungian archetypes, there are other classic character types that are associated with every story. The first of these is the *protagonist*—who is often equated with the Jungian hero archetype. 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 first-person perspective. The protagonist in *Half-Life*—Gordon Freeman—is central to the action that takes place in the story.

The protagonist must always drive the story forward—*acting* instead of reacting, *making things happen* instead of waiting for them to happen. Any *reaction* on the part of the protagonist is out of the character's control—and the immediate goal in the story then becomes regaining control. For example, a character could be goaded by bullies and lose control—reacting to their taunts by taking physical action (such as throwing a punch at one of the bullies).

Square Enix

Ubisoft



Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*) and Ezio Auditore da Firenze (*Assassin's Creed II*) are two classic protagonists.

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 otherwise larger-than-life character. The flaw could be in physical form (e.g., paralysis, scarring, stuttering) or appear as a personality characteristic (e.g., greed, stubbornness, envy). Consider any classic Greek or Shakespearian tragedy. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex,* the protagonist loses his temper and kills a man (who turns out to be his father). In *Othello,* the flaw is jealousy—as the protagonist is led to believe that his wife has been unfaithful, Othello's jealousy is so powerful that it drives him to murder. Even Superman is greatly weakened when exposed to kryptonite. Your goal is to develop a protagonist who is believable, likable, and flawed—with the ability to grow and transform throughout the story.

## Antagonist

A story's *antagonist* is the opposite of the protagonist. The Jungian archetype conforming to the antagonist is known as the *shadow* (or opposite). 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). In this chapter, you'll learn that stories derive dramatic tension from conflict—and this opposition between the protagonist and antagonist is one form of conflict.

BioWare                                                          Warner Bros.



The Archdemon (*Dragon Age: Origins*) and Alma (*F.E.A.R. 3*) are both antagonists.

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. Stephen King's *Carrie* is a great example of this: As a reaction to being victimized by her classmates, the protagonist uses her tele-kinetic power to destroy. 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. (The ending, however, suggests she might come back from the grave. Stay tuned!)

Nintendo                    Nintendo



The greedy Wario (right) is the antagonist of the joyful protagonist, Mario (left). Wario's upside-down "M" could be seen as a clue to Wario's transformational nature.

## 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. In the *Prince of Persia* series, the Empress of Time is a mistaken antagonist who is killed by the Prince—with her remains forming the Sands of Time. After realizing the Empress is not a villain, the Prince attempts to save her by resetting the timeline prior to when he killed her. Sometimes a mistaken antagonist might turn out to be the protagonist! However, don't confuse a mistaken antagonist with a protagonist who might have "villainous" tendencies, such as the serial killer protagonist in the Showtime series, *Dexter*.

## 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. Examples of these exaggerated antagonists include Dr. Evil in *Austin Powers*—and most of the villains in *Batman* (e.g., Joker, Riddler, Cat Woman).

## Realistic

*Realistic* antagonists are the opposite of exaggerated—and the toughest to create. They are mild-mannered, fairly "normal" characters (which can sometimes make them seem a bit creepy—especially if it is revealed that he or she is the "killer next door"). Stories containing realistic antagonists usually also have more colorful protagonists.

# Co-Protagonists

Sony Computer Entertainment America

Sony Computer Entertainment America



Pals Ratchet & Clank (left) and Jak & Daxter (right) are examples of co-protagonists.

*Co-protagonists* join forces with the protagonist in a story. These characters often appear in games such as massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) that require teams. Sometimes these characters do not start out as co-protagonists, but as antagonists. For example, some characters compete with each other for resources. If a natural disaster strikes or a major villain shows up, and threatens to deplete everyone's resources, co-protagonists often band together to defeat the larger evil (a common enemy). In Chapter 6, you will learn that competitors can sometimes cooperate as well as compete in order to win the game. This can be applied to the roles of protagonist, antagonist, and co-protagonist.

# Supporting Characters

In the next section of this chapter, you'll learn how Act I in a three-act structure introduces a problem to the main character. *Supporting* characters—also known as *pivotal* characters—exist primarily to prevent the protagonist from walking away

Activision



Troops in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* act as supporting characters.

from this problem. An example of a supporting character is the mentor in Joseph Campbell's *hero's journey monomyth.* The supporting characters often jump-start the action in the story—sometimes even through carrying out the bidding of the antagonist. Think of supporting characters as sets of troops under both your (the protagonist) command *and* your enemy's (the antagonist) command during a military strategy game. These characters bring a variety of viewpoints to the story. They can be your sidekicks or the antagonist's henchmen.

Now that you've taken a quick look at some classic character archetypes, you'll be able to apply what you've learned to the next section on traditional story structure. Characters are essential components of storytelling traditions; in fact, you'll see that approaches such as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* depend on strong characters to move a story forward.

# Traditional Story Structure

*Story structure* has been the topic of Hollywood screenwriting classes for decades. It is seen as a formula that, when applied correctly, can ensure an audience's emotional involvement in a film. The most common structure is known as the three-act plot structure. Other story structure formulas are considered more universal and philosophical, such as Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey,* and, in turn, Christopher Vogler's *Writer's Journey.* Let's take a look at these approaches.

## Hollywood Three-Act

The *three-act* structure touted in the Hollywood screenwriting community emphasizes the simple idea that a good story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning introduces the main character's *problem;* the middle focuses on *obstacles* that prevent the problem from being solved; and the end illustrates a *resolution* of the problem, following the ordeal of having to remove or defeat the obstacles.

1. **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.

2. **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.

3. **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.

Diagram by Per Olin
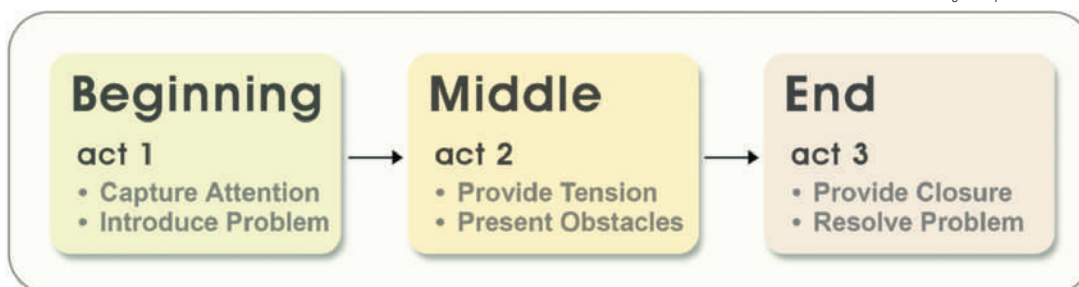


Most Hollywood films employ a simple three-act story structure.

Screenwriters are encouraged to begin their stories in the middle of the action (e.g., the main character is chased by the police), which allows the immediate introduction of a problem. In a game, it has been argued that players need to learn how to use the game and bond with the character before the problem is introduced. This is especially important in games that allow the player to take on the role of the character.

In film, all scenes in the middle of the story should advance the plot or reveal an important aspect of a character's personality. This is related to the closed nature of linear media. In addition to being limited by time (usually no more than two-and-a half hours), movies are not meant to be vast worlds for the audience to explore. In a game, there's all the time in the world for an unrelated storyline, twists and turns, and other tricks, which help create the illusion of freedom for the player as well as a more realistic game world with endless experiences. Players are also given the option of taking any number of paths in the game, which can further allow for a rich game-playing experience.

Linear stories include tragic endings (and sometimes even non endings) that leave the audience guessing what will happen to the character. One or more main characters could even meet with disaster, such as *Romeo & Juliet*–inspired *Moulin Rouge* and *Westside Story,* as the story ends. However, games can have numerous endings that are specifically related to the many paths available for the players to take in the game. Each of these endings should make sense to the player and correspond to the actions chosen. These endings should range from total success to complete failure.
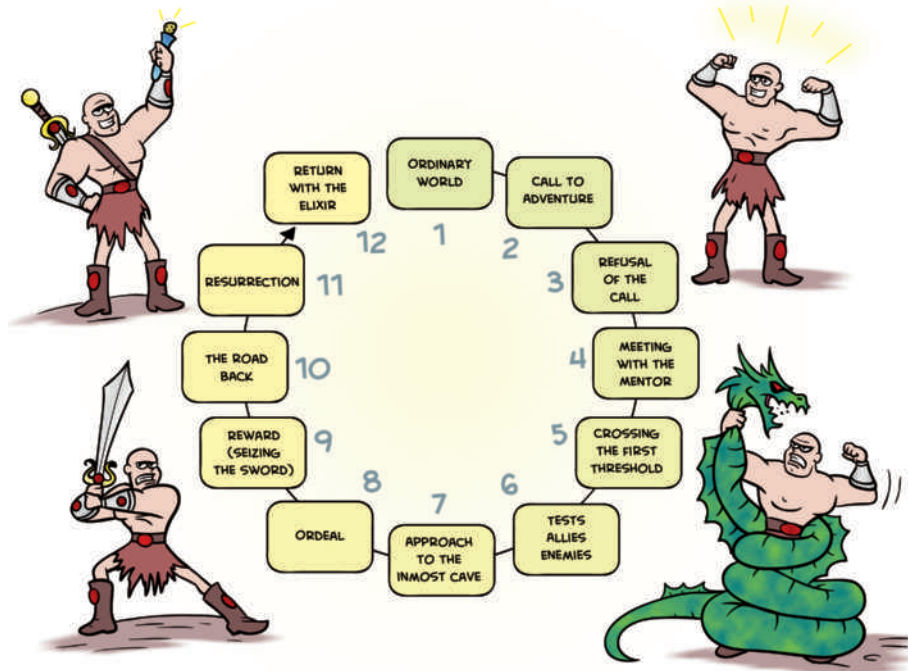
## Monomyth & Hero's Journey

In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell introduced the concept of the *monomyth*—a specific story pattern that legends and myths of all world cultures share. Campbell calls this monomyth "hero's journey," where a fictional hero must leave his community and go on a dangerous journey—usually to recover something (or someone) of value. Campbell attributed George Lucas' success with the original *Star Wars* trilogy to a story structure that made use of this monomyth. The path taken by the hero is marked by various characters, which often represent Carl Jung's archetypes. Some examples from *Star Wars* include the hero (Luke Skywalker), the nomad (Han Solo), the mentor (Obi Wan Kenobi—and, later, Yoda), and the shadow (Darth Vader).

In *The Writer's Journey*, Christopher Vogler applied Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey" to screenwriting. Vogler's steps are used as a framework below. The 12 steps of the hero's journey change the hero irrevocably before he or she can return home:

1. **Ordinary World**: The hero's ordinary world is established. Everyday life and surroundings are introduced. In *Final Fantasy*, the ordinary world is alluded to with the introductory slogan, "It was a day like any other."

Illustration by Ben Bourbon



Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* is a monomyth that can be found in all legends and myths.

2. **Call to Adventure**: The hero is introduced to an alternate world and is asked to go on a quest or journey. In this section, the alternate (or special) world is introduced to the main character. Usually, elements in the alternate world somehow intersect with those in the ordinary world—and the main character is asked to enter this alternate reality and embark on a quest or journey.

3. **Refusal of the Call**: The call is refused because the hero is not willing to sacrifice his or her comfortable and ordinary surroundings. The hero is uncomfortable, however, with this refusal.

4. **Meeting with the Mentor**: The hero receives information that is relevant to the quest and the hero's personal need to go on the quest.

5. **Crossing the First Threshold**: The hero has abandoned his or her initial refusal because of the information received. The hero embarks on the journey, commits to the adventure, and enters the special world. This section usually marks the end of the traditional Act I in a story.

6. **Tests, Allies, and Enemies**: The hero's mettle is tested through a series of challenges. Through this period, the hero meets allies and enemies. This step makes up the main action of most stories. This is where the hero must solve problems, face fears, rescue others, and defeat foes. This section usually marks the beginning of Act II in a story.

7. **Approach to the Inmost Cave**: More tests and a period of supreme wonder or terror. Preparations are made for the ordeal.

8. **Ordeal**: The biggest challenge the hero faces thus far. The hero must defeat the "big" villain. In this phase, the hero displays vulnerability (e.g., Superman and kryptonite), and it isn't clear whether the hero will succeed or fail.

9. **Reward (Seizing the Sword):** The hero receives a reward. It feels like the end of the story, but it usually is not! This section usually marks the end of Act II in a story.

10. **The Road Back**: Once the ordeal is over, the hero has the choice to stay in the special world or return to the ordinary world. Most choose to return. This section usually marks the beginning of Act III in a story.

11. **Resurrection**: The hero must face death one more time in another ordeal known as the climax. It is here where the hero demonstrates that he or she has been changed by the journey and resurrected into a fully realized person. During this step, the villain may resurface briefly. (This is the moment in a horror film when the audience shouts at the main character, "Turn around! He's not dead yet!") This is also the place where a storyteller might include an unexpected "trick ending." Perhaps the villain really isn't a villain at all. Maybe the mentor was an imposter. (Could Yoda have been evil? Hmmm.)

12. **Return with the Elixir**: The hero finally returns home but is forever changed from the experience—returning with an elixir from the special world that will help those whom the hero originally left behind. The structure is circular, with the hero returning back to the beginning. This makes it easy for the audience to draw "before and after" comparisons and notice how the hero has been transformed. The circular structure also leaves room for open-endedness. Could the hero be called upon again in the future? Has the enemy really been defeated? Is another threat on the horizon? Will the hero ever really be at rest? Leaving questions like these open—instead of opting for a neatly tied-up ending—not only intrigues the audience but leaves room for a sequel. What if the hero is unexpectedly transported back into the artificial world right at the end of the story? The main character in *Back to the Future,* Marty McFly, finds out right at the end of the film that his journey into the past has caused some major changes in the future. He must answer another call and travel into the future to save his family from disaster. In *Half-Life*'s last-minute plot twist, main character Gordon Freeman is just about to escape when he is approached by the "man in black" and is offered a difficult choice.

Although it is important to have a framework for traditional storytelling, using rigid storytelling structures could result in tired, overused stories. Instead, try to see these as guidelines and expand on them. These structures also do not account for scenarios involving multiple main characters who all share equal importance in the story. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are several player modes (ranging from one to thousands of simultaneous players) that allow for groups of characters to go on journeys together. How would you incorporate some of this structure into MMOs where players need to cooperate with each other?

##### ::::: Generational Storytelling

You learned about generations of players in recent U.S. history in Chapter 4. What types of stories do you think would work well for games that were created for the Millennial generation? Knowing that the Millennials are more team-oriented and collective, perhaps games involving cooperation, communication, and heroic teamwork will appeal to them. What types of games work for Generation X? Knowing that this generation is more independent, cutting-edge, and entrepreneurial, is it any wonder that *The Legend of Zelda*, *Tomb Raider*, *Half-Life, Metal Gear Solid,* and other games involving the lone nomadic hero are so appealing? If you are a member of this generation, do you find yourself wanting to develop a storyline like this?

iStock Photo                                    iStock Photo



Generation X is thought of as a more independently minded generation, while the Millennial generation is thought of as a more team-oriented generation.

Valve                                           NCsoft



Are *Half-Life* and *City of Heroes* examples of generational storytelling?

How about games that can be played only in teams made up of heroes? Going further, each hero could have a unique power that is potent only when combined with the powers of the rest of the team. Can you think of some comic book series and Saturday morning cartoons that fit this description? *City of Heroes* takes this tradition and brings it into a massively multiplayer environment. Players take on the roles of heroes to defend Paragon City from "super-powered villains, alien invaders, and underground monsters." Superhero statistics, skills, powers, and costumes can be customized by the players.

# Story Elements

In traditional entertainment media such as film, literature, television, and radio, it is conventional for writers to produce stories—complete with compelling characters and specific settings—that form the basis of the content. Although storylines also exist in many games, they are not necessary for a satisfying game-playing experience. In Chapter 3, you learned that puzzle games often do not incorporate stories. Consider *Tetris,* an extremely popular puzzle game without a storyline that has captivated players since the mid-1980s. On the other side of the spectrum, some role-playing games (RPGs) rely heavily on story. In fact, an RPG is most 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.

## Chris Klug on the Importance of Dramatic Form:::::

CK



Chris Klug
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University)

Starting his game industry career in 1981 with Simulations Publications, Inc., Chris Klug assisted with the design of *Universe*, the second edition of *DragonQuest* (winner of a Game of the Year Award), *Horror Hotel*, and *Damocles Mission*. When TSR bought SPI in 1982, Chris and the rest of the SPI staff moved on to form Victory Games—where Chris headed up the role-playing games group, designed the *James Bond 007* role-playing game (also a winner of a Game of the Year award), and oversaw the entire Bond product line. Chris also worked as Creative Director for Electronic Arts' MMORPG *Earth & Beyond*. A leading proponent of making the game industry realize its full potential, Chris was a keynote speaker at the Second International Conference on Entertainment Computing hosted by Carnegie Mellon University in May 2003. He also serves on the advisory board of Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Applied Media and Simulation Games Center and is a Program Advisory Committee Member for Game Art & Design for the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. In addition, Chris has taught Game Design and Production at Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center.

The best writers I've worked with are not novelists, but playwrights—who understand dramatic form: that scenes have to turn; that dialogue must be written with subtext, allowing room for the actor; and that the theme has to be delivered and visible in every scene and beat … like the best movies and plays.

## 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. A premise can be written from any point of view, but I suggest focusing on a second-person perspective so that you address the player directly. Here are just a few examples:

- *Devastation:* "As the leader of a group of Resistance fighters in a future devastated Earth, you must assemble your army and travel the globe, restoring peace and sanity in a very dangerous world."

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



**Does the premise of *Devastation* entice you to play the game?**

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

- *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty:* "Assume the role of Solid Snake, a one-man army determined to stop a deadly high-tech weapon from falling into the hands of the wrong people. Snake must utilize his skills in stealth, weaponry, and counter-terrorism to fight off the competing powers and destroy the gigantic killing machine, Metal Gear Ray."

- *Half-Life:* "Take on the role of Gordon Freeman, an ordinary technician who is forced to battle trans-dimensional monsters after an accident at a secret research facility."

- *Spider: The Secret of Bryce Manor:* "You are a spider. One afternoon, you discover an abandoned mansion. Where is the family who lived here? What happened, and why did they leave? Search for clues as you adventure from room to room on the hunt for your next meal."

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. For example, if one of the unique features of the game is that it is played in a massively multiplayer context, try to incorporate this into the summary. As you come up with your high concept, you need to think like a "marketer"—understanding that this is one element used to sell the game to the public and potential investors.

Let us say you have decided to explore the world of archeology in a game. Within this world, you have the opportunity to go on an archaeological dig in five different locations (volcano, underwater, desert, jungle, and polar). You could build an interesting story to go with each of these settings. However, this card game (*Lost Cities*) focuses on the mechanics of playing the game (gameplay—discussed further in Chapter 6) rather than a storyline. Although there's a premise (you and your opponent are archaeologists competing for the most funding and return for your respective digs), there is no focus on story synopsis. The goal is to build cards that represent a particular dig in a certain sequence. You could play the game without knowing anything about the setting. When playing games such as these, players either keep the game abstract or imagine a story going along with the gameplay. While playing *Bohnanza*—a highly addictive card game that focuses on bean farming—players might find themselves discussing their bean fields and the process of planting, nurturing, and harvesting the beans. After a while, it is easy to imagine taking a game like this and integrating it with more story. The next time you play a card or board game, imagine creating a digital version of the game and expanding the game's premise into a meaningful storyline.

## 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.

Cyan Worlds
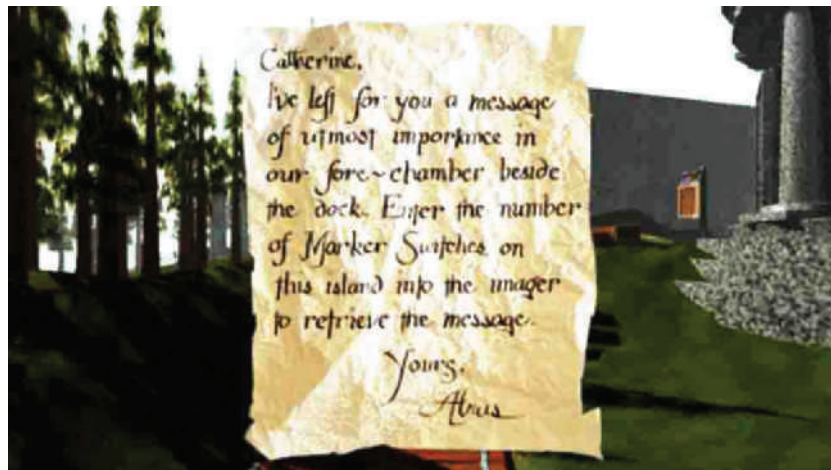


*Myst* has a strong backstory that is referred to throughout the game as the character solves mysteries related to events that happened in the past.

## 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. (See "Parasocial Interaction" note below.)



Players experience the storyline associated with the MMO, *Rift*, differently depending on their chosen faction (Guardian or Defiant).

### Parasocial Interaction

An interesting effect known as *parasocial interaction* can occur when an audience becomes so attached to characters that they actually believe the characters are real people. This effect has occurred with audience members who bond strongly with characters and the make-believe world they observe week after week on television series. "Evil" characters are hated by these audience members, who often send threatening letters addressed to the characters (not the actors). Parasocial interaction is extremely powerful—even though these audience members do not take on the roles of any of the show's characters and are only passive viewers. Couldn't this type of character bonding be even stronger in games?

## 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). Is the obstacle an enemy (villain), nature, society, fate—or the characters themselves? What is the philosophical idea behind the story? The theme could be a defining question—such as "Is murder justified?" or "Can love triumph?" What theme do you want to explore in a story?



In *Bioshock 2*, players must decide whether to harvest Little Sister (for a big ADAM boost) or rescue her (for a modest boost and the possibility of beneficial gifts later). This tension suggests a number of themes—including redemption, ambition, and remorse.

## 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? What is the history and geography of the world? (Elements of the game environment are discussed in Chapter 7.) How about settings associated with traditional media genres such as science fiction (space), horror (haunted house), or mystery (crime scene)? The setting is often tied in with the game's genre. Many puzzle games do not have a real setting (or story)—but exist in an *abstract* world—and most RPGs take place in a fantasy world.

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Ubisoft



*Shadow Complex* (left) takes place in a dark, modern industrial interior, while *Assassin's Creed II* (right) takes place primarily in a Medieval exterior setting.

## Plot

*Plot* is more about *how* the story unfolds rather than *what* the story is about. Earlier in this chapter, you learned about story structure. Each of the structures contained plot elements that guided the story along. In Vogler's *Writer's Journey,* the hero's initial refusal to heed the call to adventure and the appearance of the mentor (who supplies

Naughty Dog



Nathan Drake is gradually drawn into the plot of *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*.

important information to the hero) are both plot elements. Game plotting can be part of the game's story structure—but it can also be dictated by how the game is played. In Chapter 6, you'll learn about *gameplay*—which involves how a player might react to challenges faced in the game. Doesn't this sound similar to the classic hero, who must make decisions related to tests and obstacles along a journey? In this way, plot and gameplay are interconnected. The key to making these challenges and obstacles interesting to a player is to relate them to the story with the use of various plot devices that optimize dramatic tension.