

# Story: It's not just for writers... anymore

SIGGRAPH 2013 Course Notes

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Organizer & Lecturer

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## Abstract

This course has been designed for technical directors, artists, animators, modelers, programmers, and designers whose work is essential in making “*the story*” come to life. This information can be particularly useful when communicating with screenwriters, directors, producers, and supervisors. This course answers the question “what is story?” (and you don’t even have to take a course in screenwriting). This course uses numerous clips to demonstrate how story has been used in feature films, animation and VFX.

The purpose is to take the mystery out of “what is story” for those programmers, artists, and game designers whose work is essential in making Animation, VFX, and Games successful. The attendees will know the basic elements of story, so the next time a producer or director talk about what they want for the story, they will know what specific story benchmarks the producer/director are trying to meet in connecting emotionally with an audience. This course will build from the knowledge that story “is a sequence of events (acts) that builds to a climax....” and then lays out the universal elements of story that make up plot, character development, and narrative structure.

This course emphasizes story elements in context (i.e. theme, character, setting, conflict etc.) and their relationship to classic story structure (i.e. setup, inciting incident, rising action, climax, resolution etc.). It analyzes conflict (i.e. internal, external, environmental), turning points, cause & effect, archetype vs. stereotypes, inciting incident, and how choice defines character. In all stories there must be questions raised: What is at stake (i.e. survival, safety, love, esteem, etc.)? What is going to motivate (inciting incident) the main character (protagonist)? Will that be enough to move characters from the ordinary (where they are comfortable) to go out into a different world (where the action takes place)?, and How will the character “change”(necessary for all dramatic stories)? These are just a few of the storytelling elements necessary to structure a solid story. This course is for all whose work makes the story come alive but their job isn’t creating the story.

## About the Speaker

Craig Caldwell, USTAR (Utah Science Technology and Research) Professor, Digital Media Cluster, University of Utah and DeTao Master Academy, Institute of Animation and Creative Content, located at the Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts, Shanghai, China. [craig.caldwell@utah.edu](mailto:craig.caldwell@utah.edu)

Industry experience: 3D Technology Specialist, Walt Disney Feature Animation in Burbank, CA and Creative Training at Electronic Arts, Tiburon Studio. Academic background includes Head of the largest Film School in Australia at Griffith University. The Griffith Film School is known for its interdisciplinary program in Film, Animation, and Games. Previously was Head of the Media Arts Department, University of Arizona and Associate Director of the Triestman New Media Center. Currently Director of Arts Track, Master Games Studio (ranked #2 by Princeton Review in 2013 and our undergraduate is ranked #1), University of Utah. Recent conference presentations such as FMX '12 & '13, SIGGRAPH ASIA '12, Pixel 7 '12, and Mundos Digitales '12 & '13.

## Course Content

1. Introduction - What is story? Story Structure incorporates both plot and story elements. Plot is a sequence of events with a Beginning, Middle, End composed of basic steps that include Setup, Inciting Incident, Rising Action, Climax, and Resolution (e.g. Hero's Journey [12-point story structure], Nigel Watts [8-point story structure])... Setup involves Image and Exposition, the Inciting Incident incorporates issues of Survival, Safety, Love etc., and in the end stories must have satisfying a Climax and Resolution.
  - 1.1 Turning Points. Turning Points drive the Rising Action. Characters must make choices that propel the action forward in the story.
  - 1.2 Character Arc. Characters have a distinct point of view, have something at stake, and must undergo a change through an observable character arc.
  - 1.3 Audience. Audiences come to stories with expectations. They have an innate sense of story genres. Their interest is maintained through narrative questions and gaps between their expectations and knowledge.
2. Story Elements includes Character, Setting, Theme, Goal, and Conflict. Characters' action must reflect plausible cause & effect, match setting with story line, theme will be discovered at the end, and conflict types; internal, external, or environment. The question at the beginning of every story that must be answered is what does the character want?
3. Character, Archetype versus Stereotype. Characters in stories have specific dramatic roles that fall under the banner of either Archetype or Stereotype.
  - 3.1 Classic Archetypes
4. Conclusion – Story Structure checklist
5. References

# 1. What is Story?

It is first, a sequence of events. But there is more to it than that.

A (dramatic) story is...

- character's reactions (choices)...
- to a sequence of connected events...
- that build to a climax....
- that results in change....

Stories are primarily plot driven or character driven. The plot is the sequential ordering of connected events and incidents (cause-and-effect) that sustains momentum. Of the three basic elements of a movie's story (plot, theme, character), plot is not what the audience generally remembers – it is the situation and characters... (sometimes the theme). The theme is based on the values that are fundamental to the either the character or story.

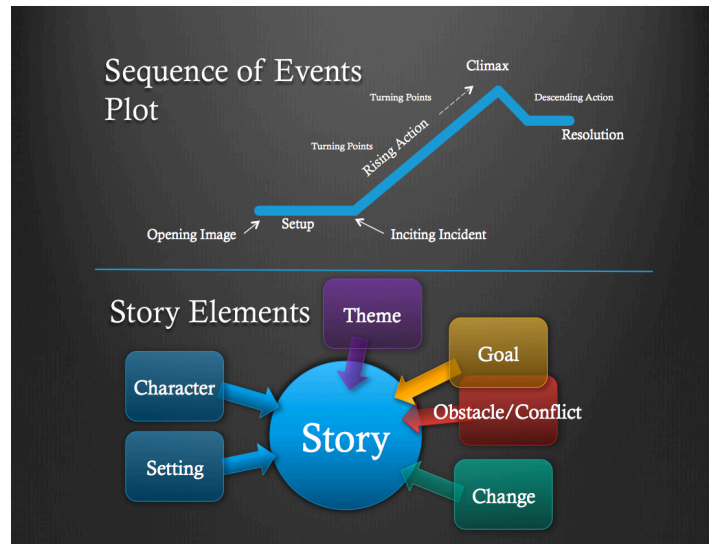


Figure 1: Plot and Story Elements

What is plot? Plot is the choice of events and their connections in sequence in a story; composed through choices in what to include?, what to exclude?, what comes before or after?, and what are it's turning points? These choices are the plot. Plot is all the action that takes place during the story.

It is important to remember that all stories have a beginning, middle, and end; though, today, they may not necessarily be in that order, Most plots have a Act 1, Act 2 and Act 3 loosely corresponding to a beginning (departure), middle (initiation), and end (return). There are "other" act structures; Situation Comedy has 2 acts (e.g. Friends, Big Bang, etc.), Dramatic Series has 4 acts (e.g. Law and Order) and Shakespeare has 5 acts.

Plot comes in a variety of structures for different stories and lengths. The most well known is *Hero's Journey* by Joseph Campbell used in feature film (e.g. *Star Wars*, *Croods*). It is a familiar structure that Campbell derived from common mythological narratives found in cultures around the world. Myths follow this basic hero's journey structure:

1. Heroes are introduced in the ORDINARY WORLD
2. They receive the CALL TO ADVENTURE
3. They are RELUCTANT at first or REFUSE THE CALL, but
4. Are encouraged by a MENTOR to
5. CROSS THE THRESHOLD and enter the Special World, where
6. They encounter TESTS, ALLIES, AND ENEMIES.

7. They APPROACH THE IN-MOST CAVE, cross a second threshold
  8. Where they endure the ORDEAL
  9. They take possession of their REWARD and
  10. Are pursued on THE ROAD BACK to the Ordinary World.
  11. They cross the third threshold, experience a RESURRECTION, and are transformed by the experience.
  12. They RETURN WITH THE ELIXIR, a boon or treasure to benefit the ORDINARY WORLD.
- [Vogler2012]

Chris Vogler, in his book *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers* clarified this Hero's Journey structure for Hollywood consumption. In all stories do they all have these steps? No, but all stories have some of them. Audiences today are saturated, jaded... with the hero's journey; but they still want it but in a way they don't expect. Thus writers must decide which set of steps not only work for them but work for the

story they are creating. Vogler points out that the Hero's Journey also has an "Inner Journey" that encompasses the fear that prevents most people from pursuing their dreams, which is fundamental for the audience to relate to the characters.

In *Ideas for the Animated Short*, the author Karen Sullivan has found that another set of steps works best in short animations: Character wants something, Something happens to start the action, Conflict, Things gets worse, Almost all is lost, Lesson is learned that changes things, A choice is made, and Success.

Others have taken this basic *monomyth* (Hero's Journey) and arrived at a different set of steps. Nigel Watts in *Write a Novel* condensed the steps on Everyday Life, Trigger, Quest, Surprise, Critical Choice, Reversal, Climax, and Resolution.

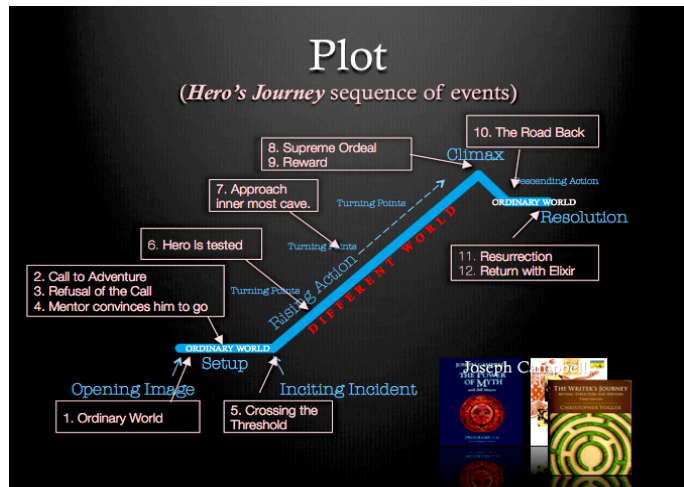


Figure 2: Hero's Journey [Campbell1972]

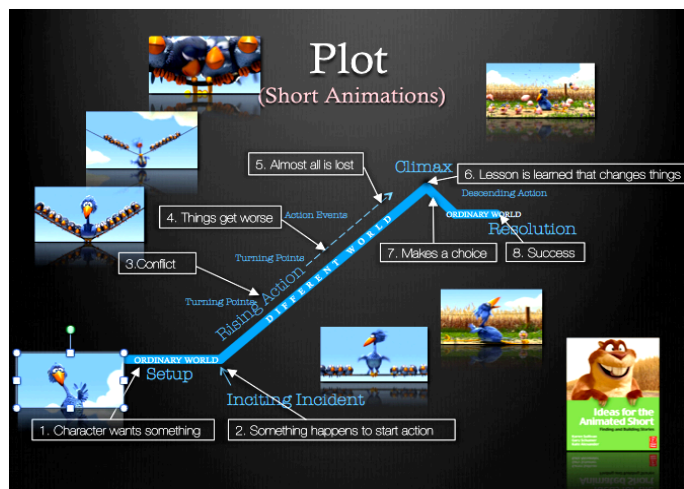


Figure 3: Ideas for the Short Animation [Sullivan 2008]

In any story there must be an Inciting Incident. This is an unexpected event, a *catalyst* that begins the story action.

There are 3 types of Inciting Incident: Action, a murder, someone see, something happens; Character receives information, this orients the audience to the story theme; and/or Situational, incidents that orient us (this takes longer). Inciting Incidents often coincide with opening images that quickly engage the audience.

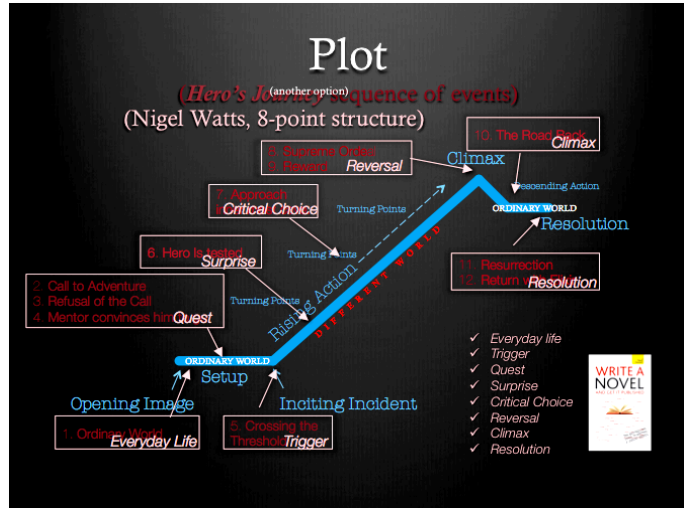


Figure 4: Nigel Watts [Watts2010]

Inciting Incidents lay out the big narrative question: what is the goal? and will it be achieved? These are key for maintaining the engagement of the audience. The most common type of narrative question is the goal question: Will the characters achieve their goal? Most narrative questions are variations of this type.

“ Question-asking can be a powerful persuasive device because questions structure our decision-making process. They do this by directing our thoughts about the issues at hand and by implicitly specifying the range of possible answers.” [Glebas2008] The narrative *is* how the story is told through narrative questions. This is why we can start watching in the middle of a television show and have an idea what is happening. Narrative questions provide the structure that makes this possible.

## 1.1 Turning Points

Between the Departure and Return is the Initiation phase of the story. This is where the major turning points are located. These include

- Change of Plans,
- Point of No Return,
- Major Setback (Figure 6).

The two built-in turning points are Inciting Incident and Climax.

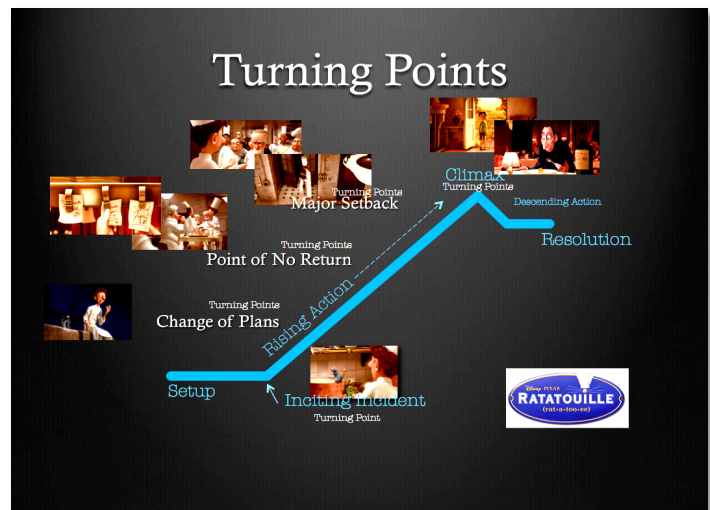


Figure 5: Turning Points



## 1.2 Character Arc

Often the specific dramatic questions in the plot center around the fundamental question: *Will the character grow and develop enough in order to solve her challenges?* The change is gradual and that change is revealed through the character's reaction during the turning points. A character's development doesn't come easily, they don't choose the challenges, and don't choose to have their life change. The character doesn't even have the choice to give up (maybe temporarily) or you don't have a story. The challenges that result in change must in some way fit the situation (even the "fish out of water" is a fit of a kind). The problem must relate to the character and the situation, with all attempts to reach their goal and reveal the theme relating to one another

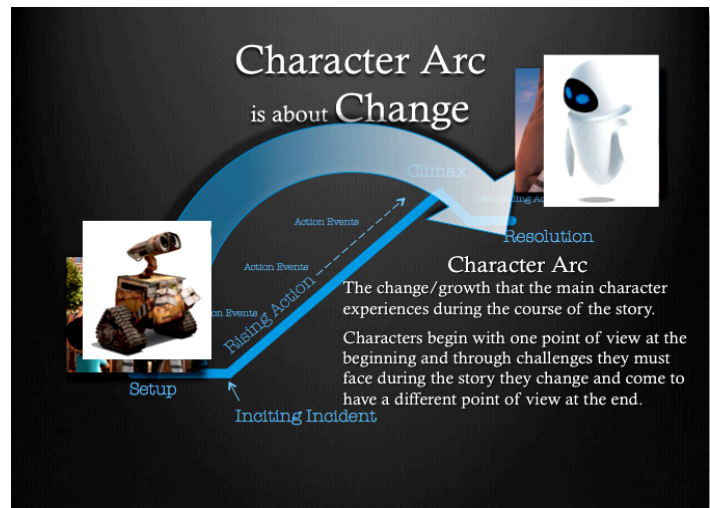


Figure 6: Character Arc

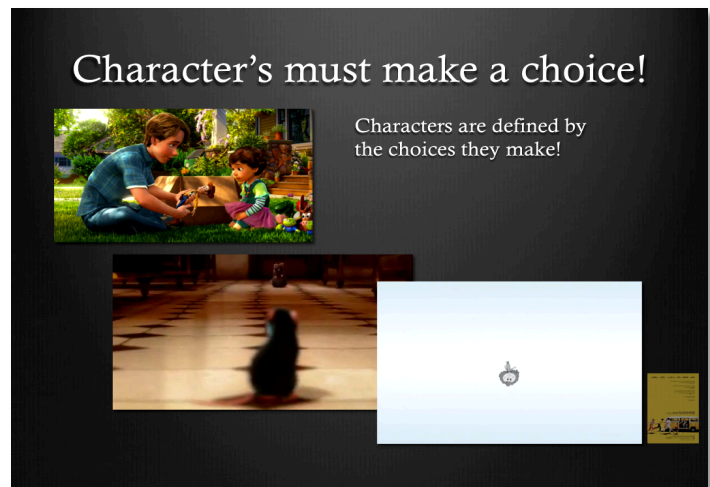


Figure 7: Character Choice

## 1.3 Audience

A good story is built from the motivation to touch the audience. Poor stories are constructed from the motivation to prove something, express themselves, or impress. There is an unspoken covenant between a director/writer and their audience. The audience agrees to give the story a chance if the director promises not to bore, manipulate, and use the audience for their own ends. An audience is not only smart; it is collectively smarter than any one person. No film can be made without an understanding of the reactions and anticipations of the audience.



Figure 8: Audience Expectations

The story is shaped to both realize the narrative idea and satisfy the audience or player's expectations. Without the audience... what is the point of everything that is created for the film or game?

The audience comes with distinct expectations of the story that can be described in terms of genres or types. Robert McKee has compiled a list of Genres that includes Adventure, Comedy, Coming of Age, Crime etc. [McKee1997] while Blake Snyder approached it from a list of Types such as Monster in the House, Golden Fleece, Out of the Bottle etc. [Synder2005] Each is valid. A storyteller must choose which approach works best for them.

## 1.4 Identification

Identification with the character is fundamental if the audience is going to relate to the character and become engaged in the story. There are a number of different ways to identify but some of the classics are:

1. Something unfair happens to the character.
2. The character is in jeopardy (physical danger, loss of job, loss of love etc.)
3. Make the character likeable: the character follows through on commitments, character shows courage, and character is kind.
4. Characters that are funny.
5. Characters are strong (good at what they do).

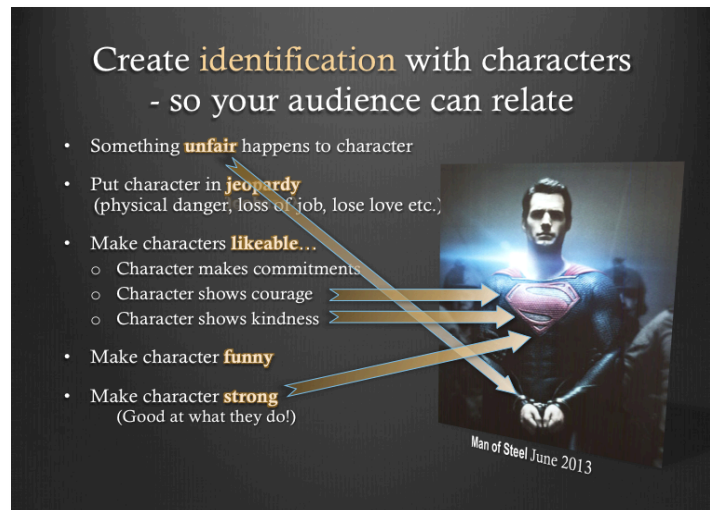


Figure 9: Audience Identification

Recently there are two very different examples. In “*OZ, the Great and Powerful*” the film struggled because the main character had none of the classic identification traits. There were reviews that indicated the film was going for “anti-hero” to bring something different to the story but did it work for the audience? In “*Man of Steel*” the main character has many of the traits audience relate to for identification.

Identification is a psychological process where audiences experience the same emotions and feelings as the characters. Audiences empathize with emotion. It is important as the character is created to include flaws that that not only make them unique but ones we can relate to in the story.

## 2. Story Elements

Elements of the story are remembered long after the plot is forgotten. *Characters*, who is the story is about; thought whose eyes the story is told; The *World*, where are the characters located, and the type of environment; *Theme*, what is the story about, courage, love, redemption etc.; *Goal*, what does the character want; and *Conflict*, what is between the character and the goal.

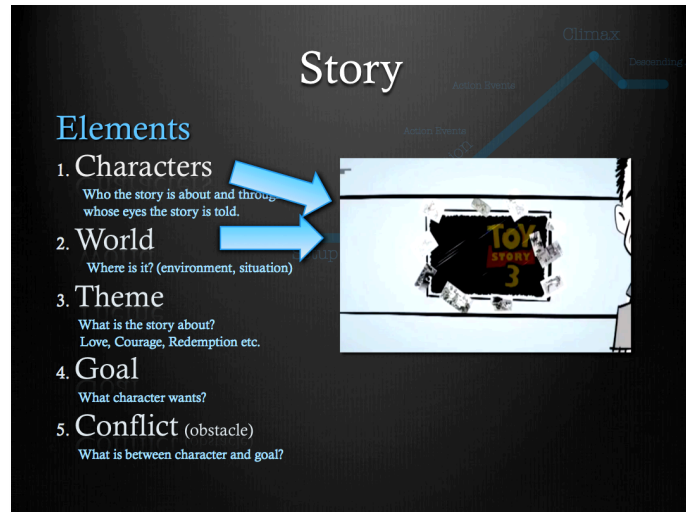


Figure 10: Story Elements

## 3. Character: Archetypes versus Stereotypes

No matter where a story is made in the world, if it works it has an archetypal quality. An archetypal story is a universal experience (e.g. myth)... wrapped inside a unique, culture-specific expression. *Story is archetypes, not stereotypes* [McKee1997]. The stereotypical story reverses this pattern: confined to a cliché, culture-specific experience dressed in generalities.

A stereotype example would be the 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish custom that once dictated that daughters must be married off in order from oldest to youngest. Inside family would be a strict patriarch, a powerless mother, an unmarriageable oldest daughter, and a long-suffering daughter. While this historical practice is attention-grabbing it is not likely to generate empathy from anyone outside this cultural experience. [Glebas2008].

However if the story uses an archetypal scenario as a platform (i.e. *Like Water for Chocolate*) where mother and daughter clash over the demands of dependence and independence, permanence versus change, and self versus others then here is a conflict that we are familiar and can relate. (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Archetype vs. Stereotype



A stereotype is a cliché character that has been so overused that it has lost originality. Such characters in animation and VFX today would include robots, aliens, mimes, ninjas, fairies, dragons, pirates, cleavage with guns, superheroes and even a representative family.

However stereotypes are very useful if we exploit the archetypal quality as one is played off another.

### 3.1 Archetypes

Archetypes - are universal character types in all cultures [Jung1981].

- Hero – brave, self-sacrificing, moral
- Father figure – wise, mentor
- Mother figure – nurturing, intuitive.
- Shadow figure – can help hero, can oppose hero, negative side of hero, may range to evil.
- Animal archetypes – positive or negative with traits, consistence with animal types.
- Trickster – causing chaos, selfish, uses wit and cunning, range is harmless to evil.

Myths – whatever our culture, we share similar experiences and journeys in life; underneath it all it is the same story. The trappings may be different but underneath it, it's the same story, drawn from our same experiences. These search and hero stories are myths, the stories common to all cultures [Seeger2010]. It is a true story because someone has experienced it and it is true because we have lived it at some level. Thus it connects and speaks to all of us. Many stories are combinations of myths (Tootsie is Shakespearean in that he dresses up to accomplish a task).



Figure 12. Archetype vs. Stereotype

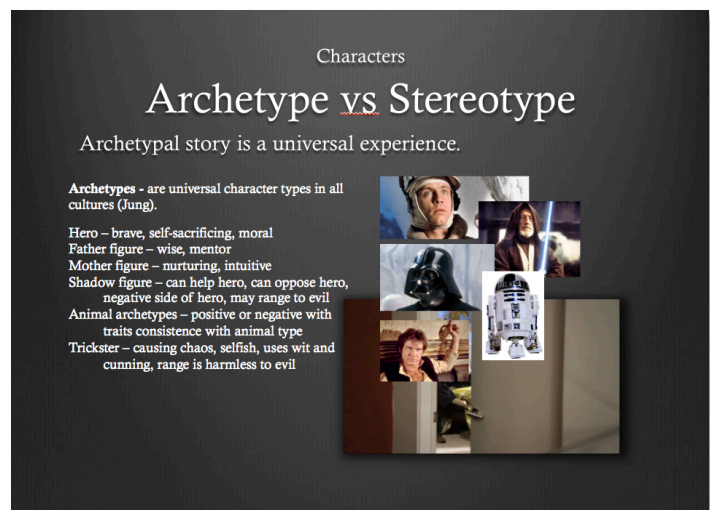


Figure 13. Classic Archetypes

## 4 Conclusion - Story Structure

### Plot

- ✓ Act 1 - Setup
  - ☑ Opening Image
  - ☑ Inciting Incident
  - ☑ Ordinary World versus Different World
- ✓ Act 2 - Rising Action
  - ☑ Turning Points
  - ☑ Change of Plans
  - ☑ Point of No Return
  - ☑ Major Setback
- ✓ Act 3 - Climax
  - ☑ Descending Action
  - ☑ Resolution

### Character Elements

- ✓ Character
  - ☑ Archetype/Stereotype
- ✓ World
- ✓ Theme
  - ☑ What is at Stake
    - must feel like Life and Death
- ✓ Goal – what character wants
- ✓ Conflict
- ✓ Character Arc
  - ☑ Must be a Change
  - ☑ Must make a Choice
- ✓ Narrative Questions
- ✓ Audience Expectations
  - ☑ Genres

### Story Structure

- ✓ Hero's Journey (12 points)
  - ✓ Nigel Watts (8 points)
  - ✓ Ideas for Animated Short (8 points)
  
  - ✓ Beginning
  - ✓ Middle
  - ✓ End
- But not necessarily in that order.

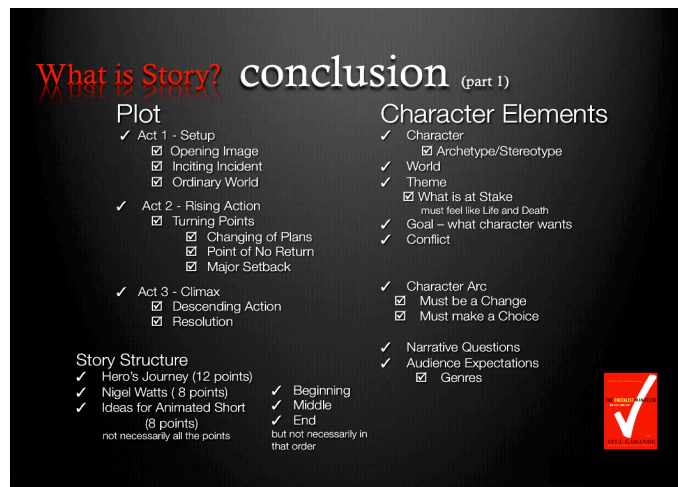


Figure 13. Conclusion Points

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