**Building Blocks: How To Structure Your Story**

**Episode 3: Act 2: Building the Middle**

Video (with closed captions): <https://youtu.be/bG8192khUYg>

Hello, and welcome to the third instalment of our workshop series, Building Blocks: How To Structure Your Story.

Last week, we talked about the importance of time and place, we looked at the who, what, when, and where of the ordinary world,

something happened at the inciting incident, there was a refusal of the quest. And then we reached the act one climax, and we crossed the threshold into act two, the middle of your

story, which is what we're going to talk about now. So, in the hero's journey structure, act two opens with fun and games. This has also been called tests, allies and enemies.

This is when your protagonist goes off on their new path. They learn new skills, they meet allies, they're having tests, and they're encountering enemies. This is usually the fun part of the story, and the stakes are generally quite low, and things are going quite well.

Yeah, so if you're thinking of what to include in here, you can set things up that are going to be paid off later, the momentum and the tension should begin to build, you know, extra subplots can be introduced and some secondary storylines. It's basically when the story really gets going, and it's when you can really have fun as a writer. So

to bring it back to our favourite film that we were talking about earlier, Back to the Future. The first film, The fun and

games is when Marty goes back in time to 1955 and he's encountering tests, he's making allies, and he's also making some enemies in Biff.

Urgh Biff [shaking fist in the air], [laughter].

In Macbeth, Macbeth talks with Banquo, he sees a floating dagger, he "hms" and "ha's" until he finally kills the king.

He shows up the next morning. He's like, "What the kings dead? I didn't know!"

He gets crowned as king himself, you know, not a lot of fun for Duncan and people like that. But it's fun for the audience.

Macbeth's having fun. Things are going well for him.

You know, there's tests, he makes all allies, Lady Macbeth and the murders... Sounds like a band name.

Yeah, it does. 'Lady Macbeth and the Murderers'.

There's also enemies, which is everyone else... that's also like a band name, 'The Enemies'.

So another example would be in Translations, the fun and games part is when Owen and Yolland

are are sort of looking at the maps and they're they're translating the place names from Irish into English.

And it's also where Yolland meets Máire for the first time. So that's where the romantic subplot starts to develop.

Yeah, so it's sort of the start of the meat of your story. So hopefully, that kind of gives you an idea of what fun and games is.

But now, as we're going deeper into these videos, we're going to go a wee bit deeper into structure itself.

Yeah. So as we travel into our story, it's also helpful not just to think in terms of the bigger acts,

the three acts, but also scenes within those acts.

So we're going to break things down a little bit more, and look at what a scene is.

Yeah. What do we mean by "scene"? You know, in a TV or film script it's very clear.

They're labelled, they're maybe two to three pages long, but a play is different, you know, you might get some plays that do have scenes

you know Shakespeare plays have scenes, you know, but many modern plays, especially one act plays

don't have scenes labelled at all. But we would argue that everything has scenes, all plays have scenes.

So what is the scene? Well, to

the flip chart, to the flip chart! And scene. Okay, thanks for joining us at the flip chart again. So

scenes. What are scenes? Scenes are smaller units of dramatic action within a larger act, within a larger play. Because stories are fractal in nature. Fractal, what does that mean? Fractal means, if you're in mathematics, if there is a shape, and you zoom in on the shape, the zoomed in area is the same as the zoomed out area. So at every stage, it is the same shape. So if we think back to our first video, we talked about the structure of stories, stories are 123. And so every part of a story, a scene, should also be 123.

Introduction, development, conclusion.

Thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

each scene is like a little microcosm of the full play.

So the beginning, the introduction, this is where the character wants something specific and they usually do something to achieve

that goal. The development, the turning point, something changes or destabilises or advances the situation, your character is forced to make a decision, and something might be learned, which changes your character.

And then you have the third part, the conclusion. That's the new reality. That's the fallout

from the turning point, something has changed which, which leads directly to the next scene.

Your protagonist might be knocked onto a new course or have a new plan to get what they want or solve their problem

and their reactions to how they do this, that's going to reveal things about their character.

So characters are constantly changing in every scene that makes up the bigger overall change across the play. Whatever happens in the scene is like a stepping stone in their arc across the play.

Every scene should end with a question. Not a literal question in dialogue, but a question the audience might ask themselves: 'What's going to happen next?'

As an actor, you talk about actioning, and uniting, and that's breaking down scenes into sort of motivations and things like that. So looking at characters desires and looking how to use different tactics to change.

Yeah, and that's kind of the essence of a scene, a scene can be thought of as your character, using a tactic to try and get something, having that tactic come up against an obstacle, and be changed by that and therefore trying a new tactic, which will start the next scene. Your character shouldn't keep trying to do the same thing that doesn't develop, they should change.

So if you're writing something, and you identify large sections of your writing that your characters aren't changing, you might want to look at that, because the essence of drama is conflict and change.

Yeah. And here's an exercise, you can pause your video and do it now or do it a bit later, because it's quite involved. But we think it's very useful. Want you to find a single act play,

a pressure cooker play, closed time, closed space, if you remember that from our last video, and we want you to see if you can split it up into different scenes.

What are the smaller units of dramatic action? Look for moments of change in the script? Can you separate the script into scenes within a larger passage of text?

There's no right answer to this, two people might look at the same script and come up with different ideas. But it's a tool, and it's good whenever you're looking at your own writing, you can split that up and see okay, this is the section where this character changes and this character changes. It's just a tool.

As well as thinking about scenes as 123, we also like to think of them as tiny plays themselves almost like tiny act twos. So you could start on the fun and games, then you have the midpoint, which is the turning point where something happens. And then things get a bit more complex as the scene goes on. And they finish on the worst point, which is then the inciting incident for your next scene.

So now you know what a scene is something with a beginning, a middle and an end. Let's go back to overall structure because stories are fractal. And we're going to look at the middle of the story, halfway through, the midpoint. Let's go back to the chairs!

So halfway through your story, you come to the midpoint. Midpoint has often been called the midterm exam, the point of no return or the midpoint reversal. This is a crossroads moment for your character where everything changes, and they have a reversal of fortunes.

So at the midpoint, our character usually does something or something happens to them, which means that can no longer just turn back, it's an ordeal or a test that results in knowledge being gained that can never be lost. The sword is pulled from the stone or the elixir has been retrieved but not yet used.

On a more personal journey sense, the protagonist enters their inmost cave and realises their flaw, they are now changed and/or their quest has changed as they move towards the climax of the play.

So an example of this, Hamlet. The midpoint for Hamlet is when he realises that his Uncle Claudius is guilty through the play within a play, so now his quest has changed. He's not just trying to establish the guilt of Claudius, he's actually trying to plan his revenge. But he has to overcome his fatal flaw, his inability to act.

In Back to the Future, our favourite film, Marty realises exactly at the midpoint, that his presence in the past has potentially stopped his parents from getting together, which would mean he would no longer be born. His quest is not let's get back to 1985, it is now let's get my parents back together or I will cease to exist.

In John B. Keane's, The Field, it's exactly the midpoint is where the auction is held and William buys the field and "The Bull" McCabe threatens William and basically that's where he starts to formulate a plan to exact revenge on William.

In The Empire Strikes Back, Luke Skywalker is training with Yoda on Dagobah. He enters

a cave, a physical cave, but he also enters

his own personal inmost cave where he confronts his flaws. In a vision he fights Darth Vader, he lobs off his head and sees his own head staring back at him, representing his own desire to be drawn to the dark side. Luke's quest is now to save his friends, but also he needs to be worried about not turning to the dark side himself.

Yes. So another one is Titanic, and what happens halfway through Titanic? Yes, so it's when the ship hits the iceberg and

suddenly the characters change their quest of engaging and having relations and steamy cars to a struggle for their very survival. Essentially,

it's something that happens in the very middle that up ends everything else. So moving on from the dirty, dirty steamy car midpoint, we have the next section in the hero's journey. Things get serious, sometimes called the bad guys close in.

This is almost like an inverse fun and games except things aren't fun anymore. It deals with the fallout from the midpoint, things are getting worse and worse, as there are progressive complications to the quest and things are just getting more difficult for our protagonist.

The protagonist's quest has changed at the midpoint, but they don't know how to deal with that. And so things are getting worse. They don't know how to deal with the knowledge that they have gained, and jeopardy mounts.

So one example of this would be in Macbeth. Macbeth starts to panic, he he goes back to the witches to get more assurances, he ends up killing Macduff's family. And then because of that, Malcolm and Macduff start to rally their troops against him.

In Back to the Future, this is when Marty realises that he needs to get his parents back together. But he can't do it. He tries everything he keeps trying to get his parents back together, and it doesn't work. Things keep going wrong in the lead up to the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance.

So "the things get serious" builds to the worst point, this is the all is lost moment for the protagonist. This is when everything that has been going against them comes to a head. It's the

worst point. It does what it says on the tin. It's the lowest point for your character, as all the internal and external conflicts get the better of them. The character should believe that things are truly lost, and there is no hope for victory.

What's the worst possible thing that could happen to your protagonist?

That's what you need to be thinking about. At the worst point, this is the lowest point in the story for them. So when you're trying to think of what you should do here, you should think of what's the worst thing that could happen to them, and then do that to them.

Yeah, be mean to your characters, essentially. So examples, in Back to the Future, Marty is unable to get his parents together. He's playing guitar at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance, and he starts to disappear. He looks at the photograph, he's not in it anymore. and his hand literally disappears. It looks like he might be erased from existence.

In Hamlet, the worst point is when Hamlet

realises his actions have led to Ophelia's death,

in The Importance of Being Earnest - so even in light comedies like that, there's still a worse point - it's when Jack and

Algernon's ruse of pretending to be other people is finally uncovered.

Yeah, so for your story to be, for your story to be structurally satisfying

the worst point should be the direct result of the inciting incident of act one. So whatever story you were setting up and act one, this should be the worst possible consequence of it. The worst thing that could happen for your character.

Yeah, so in the inciting incident of Back to the Future, what's the worst thing that could happen if Marty goes back to 1955? The worst thing that could happen is he is erased from existence and

never exist whatsoever. And that's what happens when he starts fading away. So it's a pretty bad moment for Marty. So what we'll do now is we'll do another exercise with you. And this is what we want you to do: think of a character and

an inciting incident, something that happens to them or something they do, and then write out five possible worst outcomes. And that should give you a good range of possible worst points for your play. So pause your video, give that a go, and we'll do the same. Good luck.

So we're back. What did you think of as an inciting incident and five possible worst outcomes?

Alright, so I thought: what about a man who wants to marry his girlfriend but he has, he can't afford the ring. That's his ordinary world. So his inciting incident is he decides to rob a bank.

Okay, so we robs a bank to pay for the ring. Yeah, what's the worst possible outcome of this?

He could get life in prison, and so he's never gonna be able to marry her because he's going to be in prison. Yeah, another one. She could witness him robbing the bank and break up with him. So in the act of trying to get the money he loses her, okay, or she could die. There could be like a police shootout and she comes along to save him and she gets shot - that's really bad. Or maybe he actually

successfully robs the bank, buys a ring, but the ring is cursed and he puts on his girlfriend and she crumbles to ashes. Or maybe she

marries the bank teller. Yeah, that's good too. Okay, not bad. So you have five options there now for your worst point of the story, of a story that began with a bank robbery. So lastly, before we come to the end of act two, we have one more moment in a story. And that's called the dark night of the soul.

So after the all is lost moment, your protagonist reacts to this. They experience doubt and reluctance and regression, it's often called a spiritual death.

This point in a film, usually three quarters of the way through in most films, most Hollywood films for sure, there's a moment where the protagonist is looking out a window. And they're really glum. And it's at nighttime, and it's raining and they're really sad. And they're thinking about how am I going to move on.

The dark night of the soul is kind of similar to the refusal of the quest in act one. And then the climax becomes like the choosal in the one climax, because your protagonist must now make a choice, they must change or they will die, they cannot continue unless they face their fears.

So it's at the dark night of the soul moment, which is at the very end of act two before we move into act three, that the characters look deep inside themselves, and they find a way to overcome the challenges they face, the hero conceives of a winning plan, and at the very least, is reinvigorated enough to attempt to solve the stories conflict once and for all.

They're no longer hopeless, and they're committed to fighting for their cause.

So let's look at examples. Back to the Future, it's actually a very, very short, dark night of the soul in Back to the Future.

The all is lost moment was he starts to fade away, ceasing to exist, dark night of the soul as he's looking across at his parents, and he's hoping that they're going to kiss but he's wondering what's going to happen as he looks on forlornly. Marty is actually a very non active protagonist, in the first film, he's not as active

but he becomes more and more developed through your second and third films.

In Macbeth, it's when Lady Macbeth dies, and Macbeth gives his famous "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech where he thinks on the pointlessness of life and death. If this was a non tragic play, if it was a happy play, Macbeth would use this to get through his issues and come out the end changed. However, it's a bit of an inverse here, because it's a tragedy, he doesn't change, he stays the same and that is what ultimately leads to his own death.

So that's dark night of the soul which is the end of act two, we hope we haven't left you on a downer, and that you're having your own dark night of the soul screaming "all is lost" and looking out

windows going, "why the hell did I watch this video, I'm really depressed." Because the next time we're gonna go and look at the ending. And in a three act structure, usually the third act is is a positive, it's a much more positive thing. So

So basically, what's the next one to get a gee up. But before we do, let's recap. To the flip

chart, to the flip chart!

There you go. So act two, let's just do a recap of that.

So we got fun and games,

fun and games is the part where you have fun, you introduce subplots you introduce your characters, tests, allies and enemies, then we have the midpoint. So the midpoint is the middle of your play, it's usually an ordeal or a test. And it's where the character learns something, but they don't know how to use that piece of knowledge yet, a

complete reversal of fortune, then we have things get serious

things get serious is, when there are progressive complications, your character is trying to do something, and things just get more and more complicated as they can't achieve

that goal. And things get worse and worse for them until they hit the worst point.

The worst point is exactly what it says on the tin, it is the lowest point for your character. And it's usually related back to the inciting incident of act one, this is the worst possible outcome of what was set up in act one.

And as your character reacts to the worst points, they experience the dark night of the soul.

This is the boo hoo moment that we were talking about before. This is when the character thinks about what they're going to do to change their fortune. They look deep within themselves, and they think about what they need to do to move into act three.

There we go. That is our act two. Act two is normally slightly longer than the other three acts. If we look at a three act structure, normally your act two is just slightly longer than acts one and acts three.

Sometimes it's half the length of the play or the story itself. Act one is a quarter, act two is two quarters and act three a third. But also a lot of the times act one and act three are really short and act two is

the longest. Yeah. So the acts don't have to be symmetrical, three ways symmetrical they are different lengths.

But we're going to move into act three next time where we're going to look at the climax, we're going to look at breaking the climax down even further into a five point plan. And then finally, the denouement, and then we're going to wrap things up with a sort of wrap up.

Exactly, so how to end your story, that's what we're going to deal with next. And that will be the end of our video series. So make sure you come back for that. Thanks very much for watching. Cheers.