

The ‘Story Arc’ – a Ghost of Narrative Game Design

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INTRODUCTION

The “Aristotelian tension arc” (Mateas & Stern, 2005), and variations thereof (‘story arc,’ ‘dramatic arc’) is a particularly well established model of narrative, commonly referred to in GDC talks and Gamasutra articles¹. While there are seemingly successful applications in narrative-focused analysis of video games (Laurel, 1986; Mateas, 2001), several scholars (Bogost, 2006; Jenkins, 2004; Jennings, 1996) have questioned the appropriateness of the very same model. This discrepancy is curious. How is it possible that the same models are embraced and rejected simultaneously? In this paper, I investigate the origins of the term and consider the implications.

ORIGINS OF THE TERM “STORY ARC”

A Wikipedia article claims the term “story arc” was only invented in 1988. (Wikipedia, n.d.). Other Wikipedia entries use “narrative arc,” which turns out to be a recast of Gustav Freytag’s model of drama (Freytag, 1863). Intuitively, this makes sense and we might therefore reasonably conclude that elements from two foundational works in narrative theory (Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Freytag’s *Die Technik des Dramas*) are brought together in the guise of the “Aristotelian tension arc.” Our next step is therefore to look at these sources.

The original text by Aristotle, the *Poetics*, was written about 350 BC and is available in several translations. However, the canonical translation of the *Poetics* by Butcher (Aristotle Transl S H Butcher, 1902) does not contain the words “tension,” or “arc”; neither do the later translations by Bywater (Aristotle Transl I Bywater, 1920) or by A. Scholz (Aristotle Transl A Scholtz, 2008). Aristotle writes about the two parts of the complication and the unraveling, but at no point invokes the image of an arc.

Incidentally, Aristotle’s perspective on the “structural union” of the plot, which mandates that nothing might be added or replaced seems in conflict with the application in video games, as interactive narrative requires additional material, in order to afford dramatic

¹ GDC Vault on 26 April 2017: 15 hits, Gamasutra.com: 144 hits

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agency and interesting replay. Recurring to Aristotle therefore seems to be an altogether unwarranted move from the perspective of video game narratives.

The other supposed source for the ‘story arc’ is Gustav Freytag’s book on the “Art of the Drama” (Freytag, 1863). Freytag is concerned with the “architecture of stage play” (“Der Bau des Dramas” (Freytag, 1863, p. 91)). The structure he uncovers is symmetrical, with the climax at the midpoint. (Fig. 1), however, the idea of a “story arc,” is nowhere to be found.

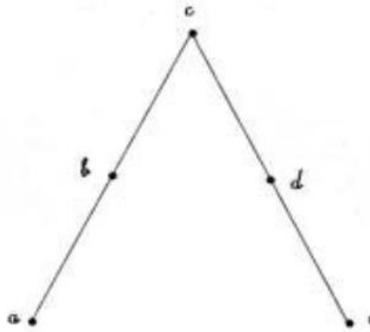


Figure 1: Freytag’s original pyramid shape.

This symmetrical diagram differs markedly from later conceptions, e.g. the one (Fig. 2) found in Brenda Laurel’s *Computers as Theatre* (1991).

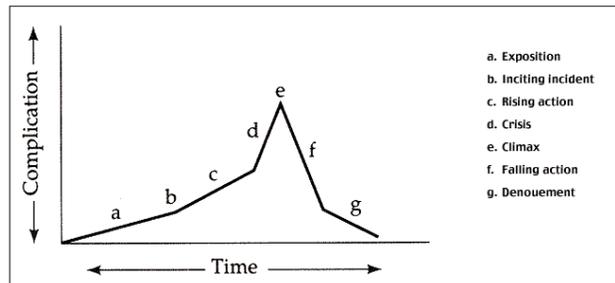


Figure 2: Story arc in *Computers as Theatre* (Laurel, 1991)

Finally, I resort to a historical approach. And indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary seems to provide an answer. It lists the first proper occurrence as “arc of story” in 1978:

1978 G. Stewart in *ELH* 45 483 In the proliferated death scenes of *Bleak House*, Dickens brings death as never before into the pages that intervene between the implied oblivion before and after the arc of story, the unvoiced voids of narrative. (OED Online, n.d.)

Therefore, in relation to Aristotle and Freytag, ‘story arc’ is a ghost-like existence, “used primarily by non-scholar production and fan communities,” (Lunenfeld, 2010) as “shorthand,” albeit with different meanings in the contexts of “serialized forms,” “interactive games” and film. The leap towards a universal structure of narrative is considerable and the inclusion of a loose interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (and

Campbell's Hero's journey (Campbell, 1949), as Lunenfeld maintains) does not improve matters.

'STORY ARC' IN THE CONTEXT OF VIDEO GAMES

In the context of video games this means that references to either Aristotle's or Freytag's models need to be scrutinized in regards to whether they point to the original concepts, or their ghosts. This difference can explain the discrepancy in regards to the support and rejection of the seemingly same model. As we can see now, there are actually two different concepts here – the original one and a ghost.

Indeed, scholars analyzing the original concepts have voiced strong oppositions to their applications in fields like video games narrative. As early as 1996, Pamela Jennings (Jennings, 1996) rejected Aristotelian principles of linear causality and instead proposed to consider cyclical, multi-climactic structures in African oral storytelling as a more apt model for the design of malleable, interactive digital narratives. In regards to analytical understanding, Jennings points to Umberto Eco's "open work," (Eco, 1989) a postmodern concept that embraces multiplicity in a singular artifact.

Maybe even more concerning is the impact of a ghost model on creativity and concrete designs. As Krystina Madej argues, the dominance of the 'story arc's "climactic plot" model severely limits our ability to perceive alternative structures, which "place less emphasis on sequence, on formal beginnings and endings, and on plots." (Madej, 2008) Designers of narrative games are therefore well advised to consider these alternatives.

CONCLUSION

The notion of the 'Aristotelian story arc' is at best loosely connected to the original texts. This status provides an explanation for contradictory positions on the suitability of the Aristotelian model for analysis and for the design of narrative-focused video games.

Aarseth has called for scrutiny in applying traditional narrative frameworks and terminology to interactive media (Aarseth, 2012). As our investigation has shown, this a careful evaluation of ideology and intent should be complemented by an investigation of the referenced framework. As I have demonstrated, the underlying model could turn out to be a 'ghost' and by its immaterial nature could be highly problematic for the productive academic discussion and for continuous research into the creative dimension of narrative-focused projects.

OPTIONAL BIO

Hartmut Koenitz is Professor for Interactive Narrative Design at HKU. He holds a PhD from the Georgia Institute of Technology on the theory and practice of Interactive Digital Narrative. With a team at HKU, he explores the topics of design conventions, interactive narrative pedagogy, forefront practice and interactive digital narratives as representations of complexity. He is the creator of the ASAPS authoring tool, which has been used to create more than 135 works, including *Breaking Points* (available via the iTunes Store for iPad) and *Occupy Istanbul*, a game on the Gezi park protests in Istanbul 2013.

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