Immersive Writing Lab – Storyworld Writing Competition

Part 3 - Plot and Dramatic Questions

Cause and Effect

Plot seems an easy idea to digest - "*this happened, then that happened, then something else happened....*" From the simplest fairy story, to the most complex of episodic and interactive narratives, the principle of a cause and effect chain of events is universal to our idea of narrative storytelling.

Sometimes a story's plot events happen in a linear order. Sometimes plot events are experienced out of linear order. But in truth there is no such thing as a non-linear narrative. X causes Y which results in Z regardless of whether we see the end result first and are compelled to find out how and why Z happened? Or experience the events of X and Y and wonder what Z will be? The plot remains X-Y-Z even if the Narration - how the story is told - varies.

Recognising this idea of Plot (a cause-and-effect chain of events) independent of the Narration (how the events are told or experienced) is important in Storyworld development as it speaks to a fundamental principle that underpins all dramatic storytelling - Dramatic Questions.

Dramatic Questions

Regardless of whether your storyworld is being delivered as a film, tv show, game, web-series, ARG, interactive, non-linear or otherwise, what will compel your audience to engage is the Dramatic Questions they are motivated to ask...

In any good story audiences are constantly asking themselves questions, both consciously and sub-consciously, about the events that are happening. Those story questions come in two types. First are the Exposition Questions - Where are we? Who are they? What do they want? Why did they do that? What's happening? and so on. These are the kinds of mental questions the audience are posing for themselves as they experience the plot. Such exposition questions are about framing and interpreting the plot, establishing contexts and scenarios.

The other kind of questions audiences pose themselves are Dramatic Questions; these are questions that have inherent risks. Where Exposition Questions give us context, it is the Dramatic Questions that motivate us to watch, to be emotionally engaged, to care, speculate and be torn between Hope and Fear - Hoping for one outcome whilst Fearing another.

When developing a Storyworld plot it is crucial to be able to articulate the core motivating Dramatic Questions that will effect any and all characters in your world. Filmmaker and scholar Karen Pearlman, from the Australian Film TV and Radio School, puts it best when she saids "questions that begin with 'Will' imply an Action and have something at Stake" are naturally dramatic. Hence the simple phrase *'Will X be able to Y or else Z'* gives us a very solid frame for writing dramatically active storyworlds rather than passive ones. As such, in writing a Storyworld Bible, it is important you are able express the specific and driving dramatic questions your audience are compelled to ask.

Certainly such dramatic questions may be at the micro-level related to individual characters and their obstacles but what is important for an holistic storyworld with multiple-plotlines across multiple media is that the dramatic questions are detailed at a macro-level pertaining to societies, groups, institutions and communities. As a simple example, the micro-level dramatic question for Star Wars is 'Will Luke stay on the good side of the force or will he succumb to the dark side?', but the macro-level dramatic question that effects every character and every plot in the Star Wars Storyworld is "Will the Rebels triumph over the Empire?". The character-based dramatic question will only give you a single plot for a single story, where as a compelling, high stakes, macro-level dramatic question will give you potential for numerous plots across numerous media.

The important element about Dramatic Questions as a basis for Storyworld plots is that they need to be Unsolvable. By this we mean that the central problem the dramatic question derives from should be so large, pervasive, broad or complex that it cannot be solved, overcome or entirely answered; once the macro-level dramatic questions are answered your Storyworld ceases to be dramatic. The plot of a feature film most commonly resolves and answers its dramatic questions but a Storyworld is a much larger construct and so must be perpetually sustainable. If your dramatic questions aren't big enough then its likely your storyworld will not have the fuel to span multiple platforms or sustain long-form storytelling and interaction. In particular dramatic questions that can stand perpetually are crucial to allow for multi-stranded plot and multiple outcomes...

Multi-Stranded Plot

The term multi-stranded plot can be used to describe a number of approaches to storytelling and takes on particular significance and complexity in a multi-platform and interactive media landscape. It could be a continuing narrative that has multiple independent, interconnected or related plot-lines that are told in parallel. This is the common approach of serial TV and, though very rare, is sometimes seen in feature film as well (such as P.T. Anderson's Magnolia).

Multi-stranded narrative can also mean different plots on different platforms but which are part of the same storyworld. We see this in many transmedia projects where a web-series, game or ARG may use the same characters in the same world but present a different plot appropriate to each platform.

The term can also mean scope in a storyworld for the same plot line to be experienced from different points of view; through the eyes of different characters such as when you play a game with one character and then play it again with a different character to experience it differently.

What all three of these approaches to multi-stranded plot have in common is that they all require dramatic questions big enough to spawn multiple paths and perspectives through a plot, or even to spawn multiple plot outcomes. In developing and testing a storyworld for its potential to support multi-stranded plot there a number of key questions we can ask;

- What different points of view does my Storyworld naturally have? Are they equally interesting and compelling?

- Does each point of view have clear and distinct dramatic questions?

- Will the multi-plots be sequential, parallel or independent?

- Will the plots exist on the same medium or different mediums?

- Do the plots have fixed outcomes or multiple outcomes?

- Are all the outcomes satisfying in their own way?

Plot Event Types

To help develop Storyworld plots that are rich and compelling we can start to break down plot events into different types. This helps us recognise that a good plot is not simply a set of 'things that happen'. Plot events have different archetypal roles within a story just as characters do. Here we'll look at 4 plot event types that give us a tangible way to think about the scope of a multi-stranded plot and how that plot effects not just 'A' character but ALL characters in a larger Storyworld - Triggers, Actions, Thresholds, Inversions.

Trigger -
Trigger events are things that happen that force dramatic movement. Trigger events compel characters, institutions, societies and communities to be in Action and respond. At the start of a story they are often refereed to as inciting incidents, but trigger events can happen all through a multi-stranded plot and the effect of the Trigger event may impact upon multiple plot lines or even multiple platforms.

Action -
Not surprisingly plot event Actions are the natural response to Trigger events. Actions are the things characters, communities and institutions do in response to a trigger. Actions are the mainstay of a plot but compelling Actions only come from dynamic triggers and risks associated with the actions.

Threshold -
Where Trigger and Action events are the obvious engine of a plot, it is Threshold events that allow a plot to move dynamically. Thresholds represent points of no return, events from which there is no turning back or the future course of the plot is altered. In this way Thresholds are natural escalations in stakes and provide the climatic tent-poles for a narrative pattern. A plot that is all Trigger and Action events will get dull very quickly if there are no Thresholds to cross that change the course of the plot.

Portal

ENTERTAINMENT

Inversion -
An Inversion event represents a very specific type of plot point that allows you to bring complexity and surprise to your multi-stranded plot. An Inversion is a reversal of fortune, a sudden change in circumstances, a fall from grace or a surprise twist. In a Storyworld, such inversions can effect whole societies or groups of characters as well as individuals. Inversion events are very good for 'resetting' the drama; when a dramatic question seems to be about to be answered or solved, an inversion shifts the objective or problem, changes the question. If not handled well an inversion can seem contrived and deus ex machina but if the inversion is rooted in plausibility of your storyworld then it can be a very effective plot event.

Audience-Centric

The point of thinking about storyworld plot in terms of dramatic questions, and how those questions are driven by triggers, actions, thresholds and inversions, is to ensure that your storytelling is **Audience-Centric.** By building the plot around the questions you want your audience to be asking, then you are continually referencing the experience you want your audience to have rather than focusing just on what you, as the author, want to say. This is even more important if, in an immersive storyworld, you are asking the audience to take part in the storyworld and be an active agent within it. A good Storyworld Bible is not just a description of an interesting place with interesting characters, its a map of experiences you want your audience to undertake.

In the next part we'll look at User Journeys and the pathways your audience might take through your storyworld… be sure to follow @portalIWL