

## Khitomer Conference 2021

# Pick a Number, Any Number: Different Structures for Adventure Design

*Host: Beautiful Night*

*Room Two • Session 4*

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:00:44 PM**

Evening all

**[RPGW] Amanda Rose 2/20/2021, 1:00:52 PM**

Afternoon. 😊

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:00:57 PM**

Just to be clear. The number is not 42

**[OF] Cam 2/20/2021, 1:01:04 PM**

lol

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:01:12 PM**

My name is Notty, and I'm the latest CO of Deep Space Five, a sim that has been around for over 15 years now. I personally joined it 11 years ago and have been running it for just over two years. Overall I've been roleplaying for twenty years and writing stories for far longer than that.

**[SC] KyleB 2/20/2021, 1:01:20 PM**

But... its must be, its the universal answer. *brain explodes*

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:01:22 PM**

And I'm slightly obsessed with how stories work

**[RPGW] Amanda Rose 2/20/2021, 1:01:32 PM**

Just slightly?

**[PF] Amethyst 2/20/2021, 1:01:54 PM**

Reminder, please keep the gifs to [#open-bar](#)

Thank you

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:02:05 PM**

There's lots of way to plot adventures for simming. Over the next hour I'm going to go over several different options so that you can find a system that works for you. Whilst obviously this is a Star Trek Sim based convention, it applies to any sort of adventure design, from D&D to Vampire, Star Wars to Traveller, and every sort of genre, from mystery, to war story, to romance

This is going to be quite text dense, so shout out questions when you want & hang on to your hats...

First, a quick show of hands. How many peoples have a template for plotting adventures?

**[RPGW] Amanda Rose 2/20/2021, 1:02:44 PM**

*looks at feet*

**[OF] Sepandiyar 2/20/2021, 1:02:52 PM**

*raises hand*

**[22] Sprite 2/20/2021, 1:02:53 PM**



**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:03:14 PM**

Thats quite good. I know some people do and some people don't.

**Zhanyt Lafizatar 2/20/2021, 1:03:25 PM**

does "it needs to fit into three acts" count for this? 😞

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:03:48 PM**

yes

**[16th] Kate, GM Langley Station 2/20/2021, 1:04:10 PM**

I have a get started guide for when someone wants to start a mission. Does that count?

**[PF] Cipher 2/20/2021, 1:04:25 PM**

Not really, just kind of hope that the idea that hits me can be used properly. But a template and plan? Not at all

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:04:30 PM**

The first thing I want to say is that a structure, or template, doesn't mean all stories are alike. Think of them like skeletons. They hold the adventure up. Most humans

skeletons are very very similar. The meat on the outside? not so much, we're all different

**Skoll 2/20/2021, 1:04:40 PM**

Beginning middle and end... kind of makes sense. Five parts seven parts it all the same beginning middle and end... unless its the horror twist.

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:04:53 PM**

thats a good segue. Lets start there, with three

Three shall be the number of the counting...

Beginning Middle End.

Set-Up, Conflict and denial, resolution

Simple and easy to understand, often used in films. Act 1, Act 2, Act 3

Set up is where everything that needs to be known for everything to else to get started gets put, and the core problem/ or at least initial goal of the story is stated (The Probe is going to destroy the earth unless the whales answer, and we have no whales; get the Droids to the Rebels so the plans can be analyzed; Bill & Ted have to pass history, or the future is unmade)

In a book or film, it's about the first quarter

Conflict & Denial, Act 2, is where attempts are made to solve the stories core problem. Attempts to solve the problem are foiled – Alderaan is gone; the 1980s are not the best time to send a Russian looking for US nuclear subs; One historical figure is not enough, and they wander off and Ravage sporting goods stores

its the meat of the story, and typically covers the next 50 %, leaving the last 25% for the resolution

Resolution: where they find a solution that works, having escaped the traps of the false solution and the results of any first stage goal followed through on. The jump back in time is made, the flaw in the death star must be exploited having got the droids to the rebellion, the history talk must be given, and be stellar.

Does this all sound familiar?

**[16th] Kate, GM Langley Station 2/20/2021, 1:07:19 PM**

yep

**[22] greenfelt 2/20/2021, 1:07:28 PM**

Definitely.

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:07:36 PM**

It's easy to grasp, and its the dominant model in Hollywood, I can tell you that.

**Zhanyt Lafizatar 2/20/2021, 1:07:45 PM**

yep

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:07:50 PM**

But being easy is about the only thing going for it

I have lots of issues with it. Does anyone else?

**[OF] Sepandiyar 2/20/2021, 1:09:22 PM**

Trying to give enough frame that ppl have a path, not too much tht they have no creative input and not too little that they turn you hard to port every second post. That's my issue with it.

**Skoll 2/20/2021, 1:09:22 PM**

Its also important to bring stuff forward... so lets try to ignore the glee that happened this week and never happened next week approach. If you have consequences in one episode or success for that matter then that should be continued on going forward.

**Cara Letsul 2/20/2021, 1:09:22 PM**

When I run a table top game I do not like a cut and dried end result to the game.

**[PF] Cipher 2/20/2021, 1:09:48 PM**

It can be seen as restrictive to some if you lay everything out?

**[22] greenfelt 2/20/2021, 1:09:51 PM**

It's too predictable.

**[16th] Kate, GM Langley Station 2/20/2021, 1:09:56 PM**

It's boring.

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:09:58 PM**

My issues are that it leads to very uneven plotting, especially when players are involved

you can end up with everything bunched in one side, and then vaguely trying to figure out where the end it.

**Cara Letsul 2/20/2021, 1:10:35 PM**

I was in one table top game where the GM railroaded people in the game, not giving any chance to go into another direction

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:10:43 PM**

I'd argue its the least predictable of the three, with the most room for player freedom but too much freedom is also bad, as players tend to wander aimlessly

**Zhanyt Lafizatar 2/20/2021, 1:11:08 PM**

My issue is that if you're using a 3-act is that you can kinda tell how it's going to end from act-1. Also, I've never not seen it used to dictate the entire arc, personally.

**Cara Letsul 2/20/2021, 1:11:17 PM**

A loosely defined goal and some borders do work

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:11:31 PM**

the pacing can get bogged down too, as people struggle for way points in the plot

**[PF] Cipher 2/20/2021, 1:12:14 PM**

I've been trying to operate with a more structured approach, but I have been warned that it's dangerous because people will feel confined, but I've also seen what happens when you just lay out the idea and the end goal and turn people loose. So that's why I bring up restrictive, but I see your point too.

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:12:34 PM**

The way to fix a three-act plot is to break up Act 2 a bit. quite a few places do this. if you look many films, plays and books, the second act has clearly defined parts, The first half, the big midpoint moment, and the second half which, if you do the maths, means it's not really, and never has been three acts. Its 5

And I will admit bias. I ♥ the five act structure

**Skoll 2/20/2021, 1:13:51 PM**

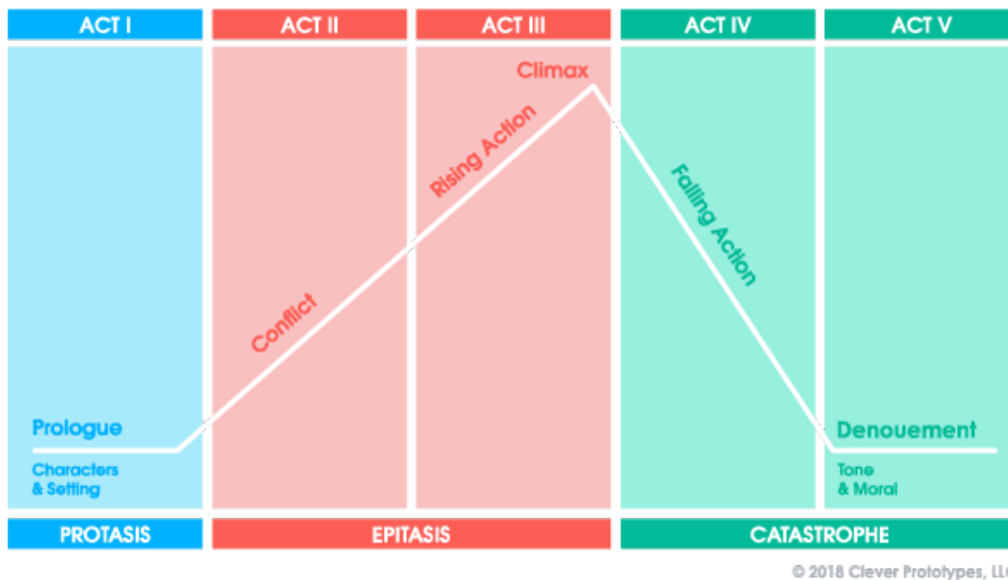
I didn't say three acts... I simply said Beginning middle and end... You want to get from point a to point b, its what you do in the middle thats going to make the story. Allowing players to do something daft that makes you try to work out how you get back to close to the finish you had in mind.

**Cara Letsul 2/20/2021, 1:13:56 PM**

There are times when players come up with something that the GM hadn't even thought of so, the three act does indeed go more into 5 or even 6

## Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:14:19 PM

and we will get to those higher numbers soon, starting with my favourite  
for those of you who don't know it, it looks like this:



Act 1 is Set up/background - set up your characters and brief them/the players/readers on the situation - Its "Your mission, if you choose to accept it.", and "All Hail Macbeth that shalt be king hereafter"

Act 2 is • Rising action - early success leads to the greatest danger - tempted by ambition, Macbeth commits regicide. It's the part where players are going to be reacting to the Bad Guys move. Its where Sherlock makes his early investigations.

Its also where you find the early stages of opposition

## [RPGW] Amanda Rose 2/20/2021, 1:17:07 PM

*pleased with graph*

## Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:17:32 PM

So if Act 1 is the mission briefing with the senior staff, Act 2 is where they take their first actions to meet the brief. There should be a sense of threat, but I generally find that making the threat too much here is a bad thing. Players have to believe that this is not going to be curbstomp straight out the gate

## Zhanyt Lafizatar 2/20/2021, 1:18:23 PM

sort of like "We're gonna need a bigger boat?" in Act 2->3

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:18:31 PM**

Act 3, or Climax is where a lot of people get stuck. They think of Climax as the end, where its best to think of it as where the enemy is at the height of his power

Spot on

**[PF] CIPHER 2/20/2021, 1:18:40 PM**

Yep this chart's going in my bookmarks

**UncleBirdy 2/20/2021, 1:19:00 PM**

@Beautiful Night No, give them some idea of faith that they'll all live...then curbstomp them lolol

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:19:09 PM**

In Act 3 you do just that

**UncleBirdy 2/20/2021, 1:19:13 PM**

Lol

In fact, isn't my char about to get said curbstomp, Boss?

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:19:52 PM**

Act three is where that screw gets turned, and it results in either a false defeat/Bad Guy ascendent (e.g. Loki owning the avengers, and scattering them to the winds)

**Zhanyt Lafizatar 2/20/2021, 1:20:31 PM**

yeah, I'm going to save the chart too.

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:20:49 PM**

or a false victory - E.g. Macbeth rises to his ambition, and murders Duncan at the end of act 2, in Act three, he is now King, with everything that goes with it, and he scatters the true heirs to the throne.

This mid part is important, it should make your players sweat. they have to realise they either screwed up big time (false defeat) or be overconfident in their false victory.

Because it is literally, all down hill from here.

Enter Act 4 - Falling Action

the fast paced rush to the end, gathering the momentum to make it to the end. This is where many of the plot twists/devices to garner ultimate success come in (or if

tragedy, the actions that seal your fate) – Lady Macbeth is consumed by guilt, the witches prophesy his downfall and Macduff stirs Prince Malcolm to retake his throne

Macbeth's security from his false victory basically unravels fast,

Its also the place to put any little twist or mcguffin needed to survive/solve Act 5.

**[22] greenfelt 2/20/2021, 1:24:02 PM**

I might be premature in asking this... but with a structure like this, how do you keep your writers on board and on track with it?

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:24:15 PM**

I'm coming to that

**[22] greenfelt 2/20/2021, 1:24:24 PM**



**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:24:35 PM**

Act 5 is Resolution - the final confrontation - "Use the Force Luke"; Birnan wood to Dunsinane, Lay on MacDuff!

So, its obviously a lot more structured. the trick, (and DS5 players, go to room one :P) is to not tell them

When I'm plotting I know vaguely what things are going to go in each step.

**Cara Letsul 2/20/2021, 1:25:59 PM**

yes using the proverbial carrot

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:26:02 PM**

and set up main mission posts accordingly.

i.e. Act 1 is the mission brief with senior staff.

then Act 2 can be one or more posts where they try and solve things, I let them decide what they're going to do

and then Act 3 becomes the bad guy dealing with it, and handing them their behinds

the trick is do it in such a way that you can hint at a possible path forward

Which means posts in act 4 are largely, "this looked like it would have worked if we held on a little longer, can we try again?"

using NPCs, or just letting players talk it out.



they then spend act 4 securing the plot key, before they serve up the resolution, thinking its all their idea

Building in bits in Act 2 to point at 3, things in act 3 to point at 4, and then 4 to point at 5

Was that what you were hoping for @greenfelt

**[22] greenfelt 2/20/2021, 1:29:59 PM**

More or less.

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:30:16 PM**

I said this was going to be text dense. I hope I'm not losing anyone

**[22] greenfelt 2/20/2021, 1:30:53 PM**

In general terms, how much structure goes into planning missions like that? And what do you communicate to the players?

**[RPGW] Amanda Rose 2/20/2021, 1:30:53 PM**

*is not lost and is liking this much better than the alpha read 😊*

**[22] greenfelt 2/20/2021, 1:31:20 PM**

Like how much flexibility do they have to find new directions that you might not thought of.

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:32:39 PM**

In theory, all of the flexibility they want., because I know the general shape, act 2 is rising action, exploration, act 3 is bad guy ascendent etc.

but the details is all the players

E.g., the mission on Ds5 is starting on act 2 of the Cardassian invasion. I have made 0 plans for what happens, only that it's going to be Cardassians trying to grab the research colony and the portal caves, and the players have all the resources of the station to use to resist.

I haven't designed any set pieces, and so far I have a Heavy Weaponry Shoot out in one location, dog fighting to protect civilians in a nother, and the intel officer is sabotaging the enemy communications

They came up with that, I didn't tell them to do it. All I have to do is react

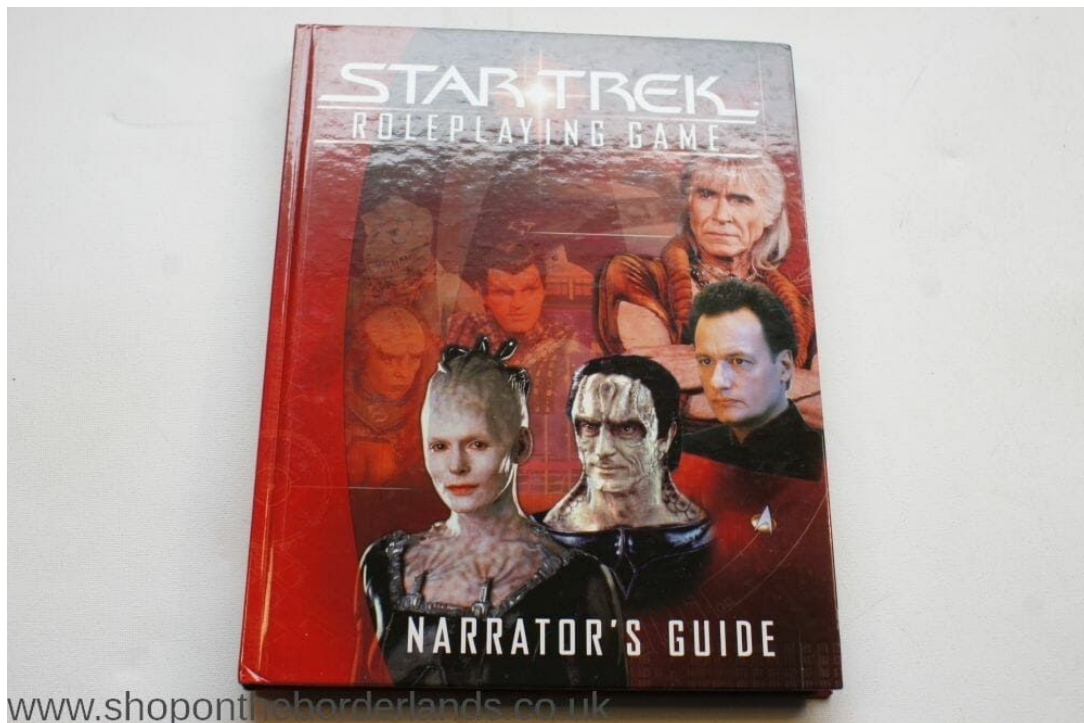
Act 3 will come and give them the option on do they fight to the death, or withdraw/surrender

and knowing them, they'll do something different again

So, Moving on. Sometimes it helps to break 5 acts down, so you know where and how to put those crumbs in that leads to each act. So I want to talk now about 7 acts/ points

This one and the last one I'm going into in detail, is actually from Star Trek Roleplaying Games Narrators guide from Decipher, and includes contributions from some absolute giants of the RPG industry. Its right there in Chapter 4, and maps it onto the 3 act structure, but this feels forced, and I like it better in the 5 Act structure (I did mention I was biased, didn't I). But honestly, each of its points stands alone, making it a seven act/point structure. Track it down if you can

<https://www-shopontheborderlands-co-uk.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/DSC06946.jpg?strip=all&lossy=1&ssl=1>



**Cara Letsul 2/20/2021, 1:39:15 PM**

Good one.

**Zhanyt Lafizatar 2/20/2021, 1:39:31 PM**

Oh, that's neat

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:40:02 PM**

so 7 points

1) Set up|

2) Plot twist 1

3) Pinch 1 (Bad guy attack)

- 4) Midpoint
- 5) Pinch 2
- 6) Plot twist 2
- 7) Resolution

which might look a bit like this

- 1) Harry lives in a normal house
- 2) You're a wizard Harry, come to Hogwarts
- 3) Troll attacks
- 4) Rumours of you know who being back, Harry is attacked at quidditch - hes getting quite good at this wizarding thing.
- 5) Someone is killing unicorns to stay alive - dark magic
- 6) Harry's friends get him through the tests to the stone
- 7) The philosophers stone is claimed, Quirral is defeated

**aio 2/20/2021, 1:44:02 PM**

Spoilers...



**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:44:10 PM**

the interesting thing about this plot structure is the authors recommend you write it out of order

Its twenty years old. I think we're safe

the authors suggest working out your plot in this order:

**Reminder 2/20/2021, 1:45:03 PM**

*This is your 15-minute warning*

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:45:09 PM**

End point - what is the end of the adventure you're aiming for

Start - the opposite states of the end,

Mid point - the bit where it is obvious that that status quo of the start will not hold, and the end state may become visible, from a distance. Often the point where the hero goes from reactive to active

Twist 1 - what gets things moving

Pinch 1 - where we meet the opposition

Pinch 2 - how do the opposition react to actions in the midpoint, and the change in their status quo

Twist 2 - What the hero needs to do/learn to have all he needs to survive/triumph in the final resolution.

Which is quite useful advice. Starting with the end scene is useful, if you know you want a big space battle, or to unmask a murder in a country house or get the medicine to the colony on time

the risk you run with this method is its a *lot* easier to end up railroading your characters

however, it makes it easier to know when and where to put in key parts of the adventure.

especially any plot twists you might be planning

So, three, five, seven, all make for good structures for adventures, with more control over pacing as you go up, whilst still largely having room for your own ideas and the players ability to derail every single plot every written

But wait, there's more

If you've ever looked at how to write sections of the library, you know there's more ways to swing this particular cat

**Nikki 2/20/2021, 1:50:42 PM**

(some of those ways named after cats)

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:50:52 PM**

E.g. There is David Seigel's 9 point structure, Save The Cat has 15 beats, and the granddaddy of them all, The Heroes Journey has 17

(though with a revision by Christopher Vogler gets it down to 12)

**Nikki 2/20/2021, 1:51:19 PM**

I personally ADORE Harmon's plot embryo

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:51:32 PM**

I shall have to look that one up

**Nikki 2/20/2021, 1:51:41 PM**

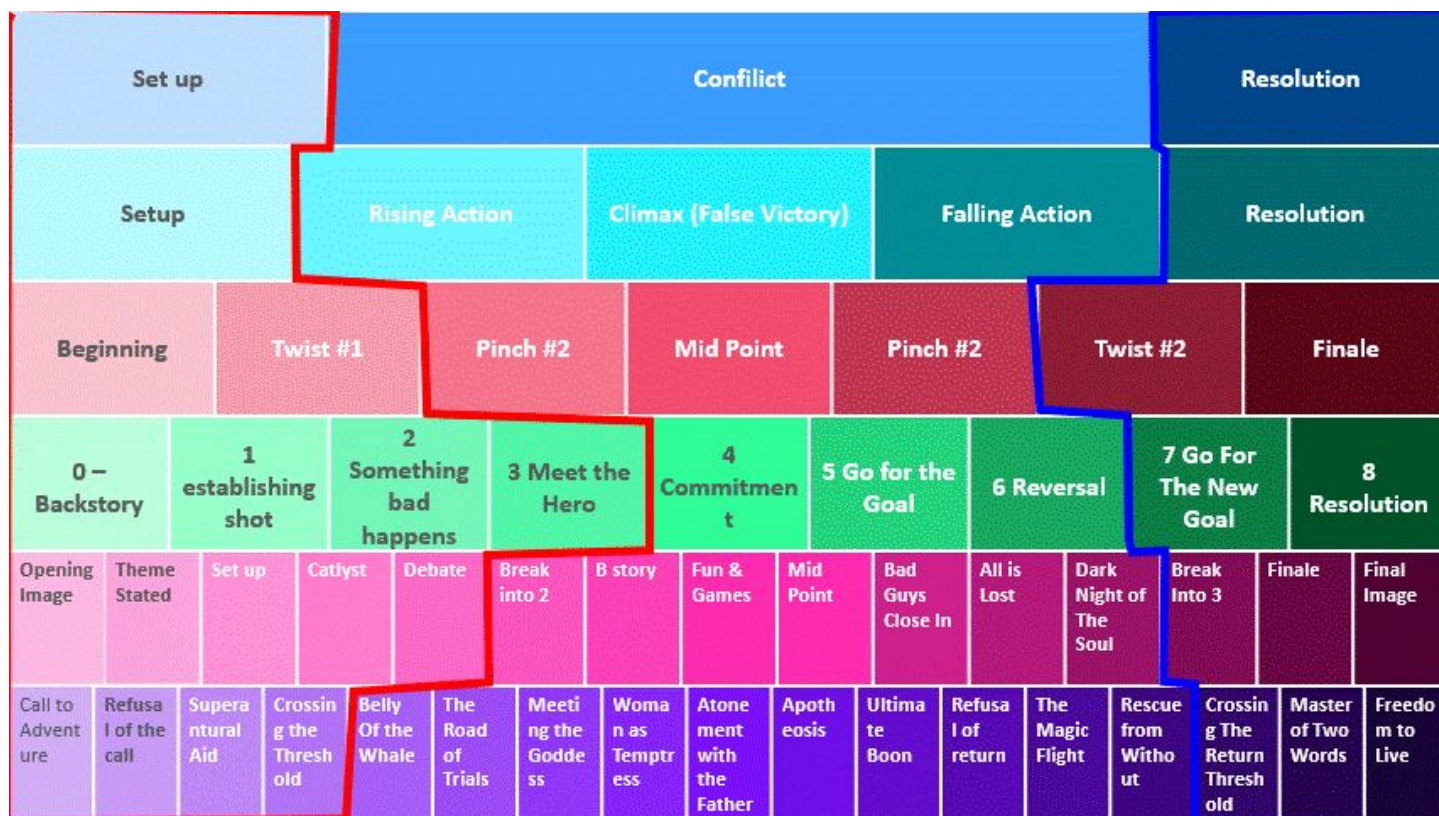
but i've charted it with act structures and they contain similar elements

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:52:27 PM**

But I try to avoid bigger structures for adventure writing because when you venture into the higher numbers is that the more points you have to account for, the less room is available for player action. If the biggest danger of the 7 point structure was railroading, this threat is magnified for every new number of items you try and squeeze in. Keeping to lower numbers, even the 7 point structure, leaves more room for Players to determine the course of action

And at a certain point, its just a different way of describing what to put in the acts of small structures

e.g. this 5, 7, 9, 15, & 17, plotted against the 3 act structure



**Nikki 2/20/2021, 1:53:58 PM**

lol, yeah, i did one of those once

**[OF] Capt. Phoenix Lalor 2/20/2021, 1:54:08 PM**

I will say that since @Beautiful Night joined my game I have become a better CO, making things make sense

**[RPGW] Amanda Rose 2/20/2021, 1:54:32 PM**

@Beautiful Night is awesome @Phoenix Lalor.

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:54:42 PM**

If you look down at the bottom three rows you can see that much of their extra steps just fill out what to put in our old friend the 3 Act Structure

**Reminder 2/20/2021, 1:55:08 PM**

*This is your 5-minute warning. Consider moving the conversation to the appropriate overflow room.*

**Nikki 2/20/2021, 1:55:18 PM**

Some times, I think there is so much you can do in the planning phase, but I ALSO find this thinking useful for reverse engineering a stuck story to find out what needs to come next.

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:55:22 PM**

I would recommend looking up Save The Cat though. I find it helps when I'm improvising to know where i want to put the emotional low blows I may be saving up

**Zhanyt Lafizatar 2/20/2021, 1:55:29 PM**

i think expanding steps is useful for solo or small group writers, but not as great for larger groups

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:56:39 PM**

I agree its not good for large groups. Though larger structures could be good for planning long campaigns, especially for table top

Hopefully, you're all still awake and haven't nodded off. Any questions, observations etc

Apart that I'm wordy as all hell

I know that already 😊

**[22] Sprite 2/20/2021, 1:57:28 PM**

Excellent session. Thank you!



**[OF] Capt. Phoenix Lalor 2/20/2021, 1:57:39 PM**

<https://tenor.com/view/excellent-sun-gif-11533548>

**Zhanyt Lafizatar 2/20/2021, 1:57:43 PM**

it was very informative, yeahg

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:57:50 PM**

In that case, I'll leave you with my final thoughts:

**[RPGW] Amanda Rose 2/20/2021, 1:57:50 PM**

*chants* NOTTY NOTTY NOTTY

**UncleBirdy 2/20/2021, 1:57:53 PM**

Great Job, Boss!!

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:57:58 PM**

There are multiple ways to structure an adventure

They all have in common the idea of a false victory/failure in the middle, and a twist towards the end, with more or less soul searching/all is lost depending on genre and length.

The more detailed structures are really just expansions of the shorter structure, going into more detail about the nature of the set up, the conflict and the resolutions

The more detailed ones think about the emotional impact as well as the action – so good to know, for improv purposes rather than building in specifically

Its okay to mix and match. A quickie post may be fine with a three act section. If you're planning a campaign, you may want to write an adventure for each point on the Save The Cat Beat sheet (seriously, read Save The Cat)

**Nikki 2/20/2021, 1:58:06 PM**

Thanks for sharing! I hope others see this before they see mine, as i kind of reference story structure!

**Skoll 2/20/2021, 1:58:44 PM**

But there is one rule above all others that you as a gm must bare in mind... if you aren't having fun then chances are others aren't either.

**UncleBirdy 2/20/2021, 1:58:56 PM**

True

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:59:03 PM**

@Skoll this is the one rule to rule them all

**[PF] Amethyst 2/20/2021, 1:59:24 PM**

@Beautiful Night thank you for a great panel!

**UncleBirdy 2/20/2021, 1:59:38 PM**

"If Mama ain't happy, ain't NOBODY happy!"

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 1:59:40 PM**

You're welcome

**Skoll 2/20/2021, 2:00:03 PM**

Sorry I dropped out I've been catching up on some sci fi.

**[OF] Emu - Fawkes/Loki/Acad 2/20/2021, 2:00:15 PM**

Feel free to continue your conversations regarding this topic in [#overflow-two](#) !

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 2:00:58 PM**

Hey people, anyone want to talk story structure for adventure design, ping me here.

though given how much I talked in the last hour, you may feel you've heard enough



**Nikki 2/20/2021, 2:05:33 PM**

I'll totally be reading back over. I understand a lot of story structure, but it is difficult in collaboration. I've decided to not tell my co-writers about my obsession with structure while writing. they feel there's no magic if they see the scaffolding lol

I'm a very random free form person, and i was just amazed when i picked a structure at how I started getting past trouble spots that used to shut me down.

i used a 5ish point structure the last time I GM'd and it was helpful for me to prompt the plot pushes and easy to adjust with what new things writers added detail wise. I just incorporated their new material like woven ends. ALSO running B-plots with their own structure that you can find ways they come in handy for A plot later. (for bigger sims esp, or sims with lots of non-officer characters)

**Beautiful Night 2/20/2021, 2:14:44 PM**

B plots are ,y weakness. I get hyperfocused. I'm trying to be better

thankfully I have plenty of players happy to do do their own thing, and then figure out how it all fits together



many brains are better than 1