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GAME NARRATIVE SUMMIT

The Dramaturgy of Video Games: Theatre, Story and Empathy

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#GDC22



Why this talk?

- Theatre kids and Game Developers seem to come from the creative vein
- Previous GDC academic topics on the subject include immersive theatre but not as many on the two together
- This was true for my own story:
 - *Heirloom* being inspired by Tennessee Williams plays
 - My work in on camera hosting (OWL's Vancouver Titans, Xscolla, IGDA Foundation)
 - BA in theatre from UC San Diego
 - First professional experience was at The La Jolla Playhouse

As an Actor



As a Game Developer

Georgia Association of Game Developers at SIEGECON 2020

Winner, Best Audio

Winner, Best Student Game

2020 New Media Writing Prize - Shortlist

Games for Change Awards 2021

Nominee in the category of Best Student Game

Women in Games Global Festival 2021

Winner in category of Favorite Game by a woman or female team

Indiecade 2021 - USC Games Featured Showcase



How are they tied together?

Empathy in Games and Empathy in Theatre
are two of the only forms of storytelling that
require **active participation** from the
audience or player.

Wired Games by Jutharat Pinyodoonyachet

Video Games are the most highly evolved form of theatre

Technology as a conduit of empathy and storytelling instead of live performance

(Nothing I'm saying is new, but hopefully the framing of it can be used in accessible and productive ways for teams to enrich their stories)



Little Foxes by Lillian Hellman

How is this different from books or film?

Games - the player has to actively move something in real time

Theatre - the audience has to watch actively in real time (performers have to perform actively in real time exactly like players)

Harvest Moon One World: Natsume



A Raisin in the Sun: Lorraine Hansberry

The Actor within Player and Performer

- **Theatre** - Actor portrays character on stage
- **Games** - Player portrays character on screen
- Same exact functions and control scheme but different medium

**What do both of these
particular mediums lead
us to as an audience,
performer, or player?**

Empathy

"I might watch someone cry at a movie theatre or be moved to tears but I myself as am not crying AS the character within their specific situation like in games or theatre."

- The practice of feeling close to emotionally and personally to someone other than yourself
- Actor within Character and Player within Character
- A type of relationship that is rarely able to recreated in other mediums
- Theatre and Games unlike movie or books are NOT static and are active



Hamlet: William Shakespeare

Legend of Zelda Skyward Sword: Nintendo



Catharsis

Emotionally purging is beneficial for humans and innate in what we look for in narratives. (Funeral Dirges, wailing within Greek theatre and Laments.)

- Release of emotions for the audience or player:
- Ritualistic purging experience at the end that hopefully brings resolution
- What am I looking for within a narrative? Helpful as a designer and player
- To escape, to feel less alone, to laugh, to cry, to journey, to feel



Last of Us 2: Naughty Dog

The Trojan Women: Euripides



Performance

"I am not performing when I am eating some chips and laying on my couch in my living room on my game console!" - Someone in the audience probably

- The act of performing on stage as actor within character
- The act of performing within screen as player within character
- Both require the Willing Suspension of Disbelief to give into performance
- Game Platforms with Streamers as performers roleplaying publicly

Cyberpunk 2077: CD Projekt Red MegMage



Gin Game: Donald L. Coburn

How can I use these principles for game developers?

- **Dramaturgy as world building** for game designers
- **Structure, plot, and development**
- **Actor objective work** within game scripts for developing characters

Dramaturgy

Study of dramatic composition and representation of main elements on the stage

How to Defend Yourself: Liliana Padilla



Game or Narrative Design - Hire consultants for this work who specialize in that genre, theme or have individual people tasked to do this

Schell Games VR Consultants

To ensure Lost Recipe's accuracy and authenticity, Schell Games partnered with subject matter experts to guide the creation of each location within the game, including Dr. Sébastien Dubreil (Teaching Professor of French & Francophone Studies, Second Language Acquisition, and Technology-Enhanced Learning - Dept. of Modern Languages, Carnegie Mellon University) and Stephan Caspar (Assistant

World building - Research

- I should know all the rules and specifics of how this place operates. Politically, ethnically, socially, culturally, religiously, etc.
- I should know metaphysical expressions and specific lingo used in the world.
- Why this word choice?
 - How would it be used in different situations?
 - Does it mean something deeper if the word is used multiple times?
- I should know the history and cultural importance of other comparables of the genre.
- What can we learn from the design of this genre and other developers?
- What did they do well? What did they not do well?

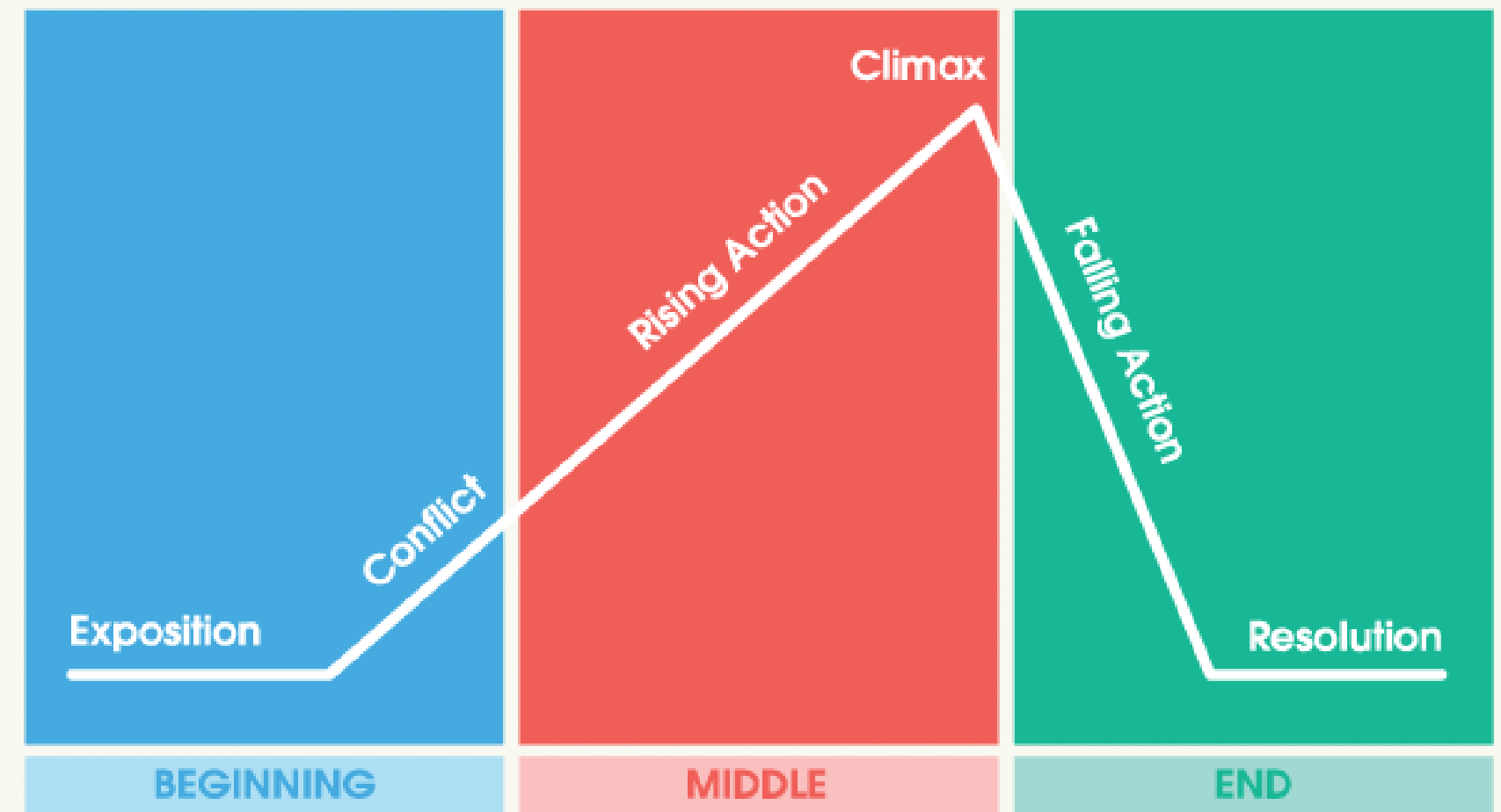
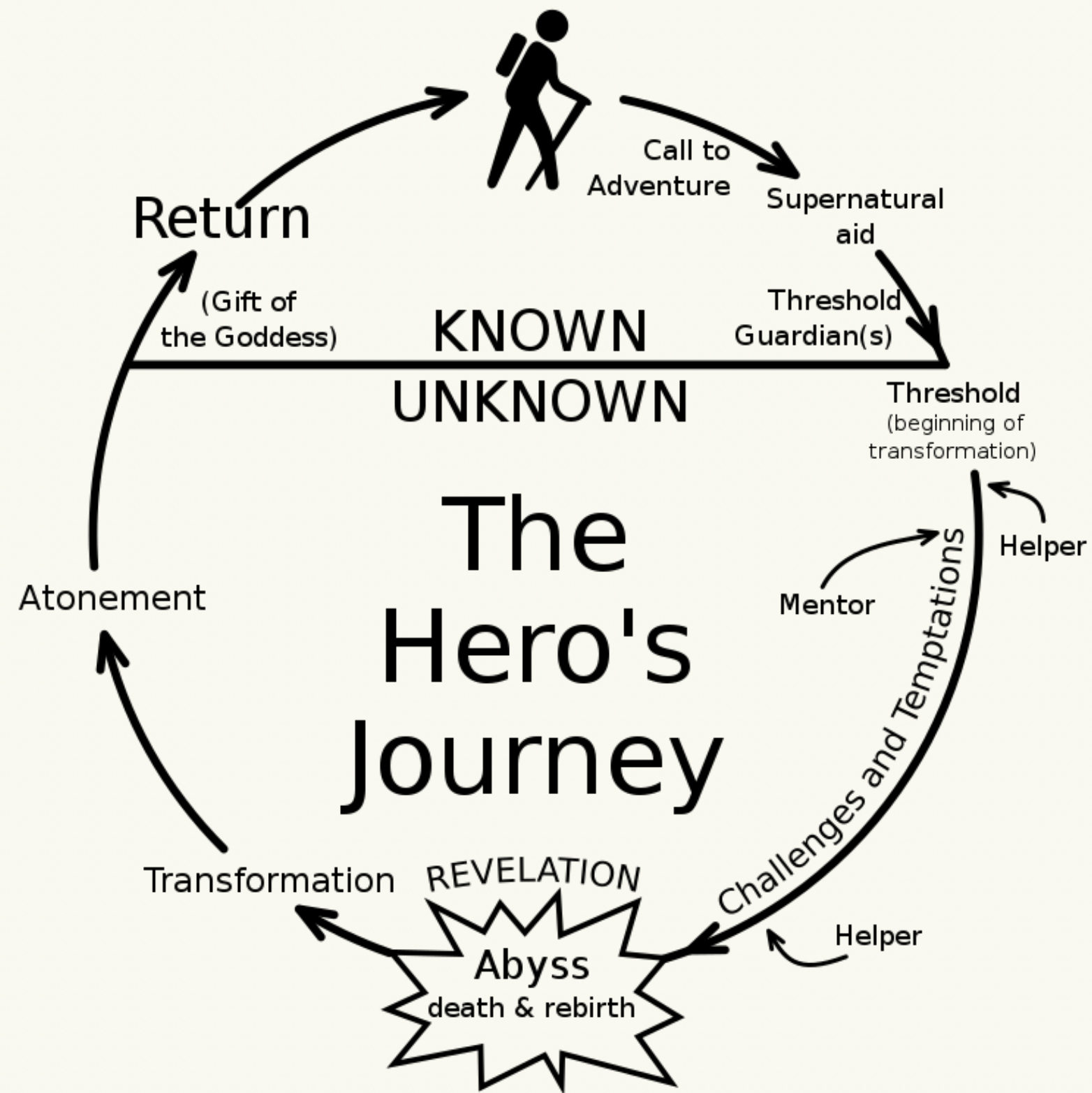
Narrative Structure

Another technical duty the Dramaturg could play to help our actors or director.

Should have physical copy of the emotional beats or narrative track in a graph or visual form.

Sequence/Object Name	Characters Encountered	Brief Description of Events/Memory Triggered	Object Location	Player Mechanics	Player Goal	Design Goal	Emotional Beat
BEGINNING							
USC Games logo							
Berklee College of Music logo							
Title screen with game logo		Show game title/credits w/ content advisories.		Click to start the game	Start the game.		
Introduction	Unknown voice	An unseen narrator tells the player where they are and what they need to do to exit this space. They see a well-lit indoor space, that's cozy and domestic. Background music starts playing.		Listen	Learn about the goal of the game.	Communicate goal and overall framing of the game.	Intrigue
MIDDLE							
Baby toy	Hailey, Kit	Hailey and Kit vow not to tell Anne Marie the truth about her real mother until she's an adult.	Bed	(e)	Learn about the baby	Establish situation.	Surprise, sadness, disapproval
Family tree drawing	Young Anne Marie, Kit	Kit helps very young Anne Marie create a diagram for a homework project.	In a drawer or scrapbook		Learn about the family	Plant the seed about who Anne-Marie's parents really are.	Nostalgia, love, protectiveness

Heirloom Game Project Macro



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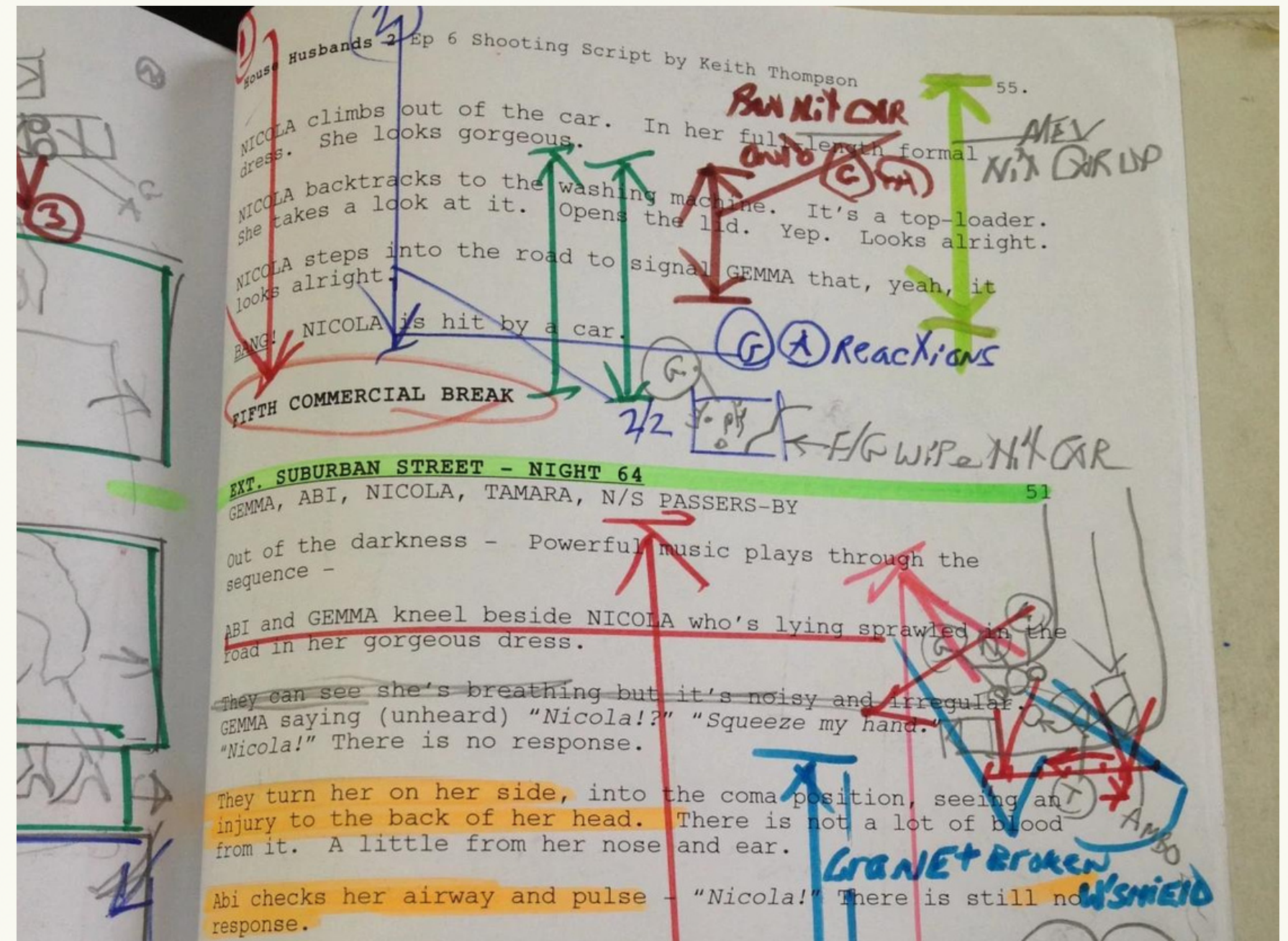
Structure of the Holistic Project

- I should know the Writer's Journey of the whole experience and be able to map it on a visual chart.
- Where is the beginning, middle and end?
- If it's an "on rails" narrative does this make sense to the player?
- Do I know the flow and rhythm of the piece?
 - Does it slow down at certain parts, is it too speedy? What is its pacing? Is this intentional?
- Even harder if it's an "branching" narrative but does this make sense to the player through each separate storyline?
- Really good and DIFFICULT narrative design is when you can track each of these through a branching narrative and they all equally hit as equally.

Character Work

Often an outside actor or dramaturg will do this once you give them a script. If someone on your team can do this or a Performance director can, it will help clarify narratives.

By using tools of actor study to game narratives you can make characters richer and more thought out.



House Husbands: Keith Thompson

Psychological Theories and Objectives

- I should be able to go through the script and break up a character's changing objectives through each scene.
- What is their objective overall
- What are they motivated by? (Money, love, fame, family, etc.)
- HOW do they go about getting their objective? (Action verbs: to lie, to entice, to punch, etc. They might do this physically or verbally.)
- What is the subtext of a line? (What I say vs what I actually mean.)
- I should know the relationships between characters and why they are the way they are.
- Why are they this way? (Where did they come from RIGHT before this scene started? Where are they going?)

Examples of Performance Practices for Game Teams

- Can you hold a "read through" for your script? (Table work!)
 - If writers can listen and take notes on what feels more natural: great!
- Can you record voice talent together?
 - Helpful for performances and ensemble building relationships. Can be done remotely too!



Read through: Roundabout Theatre Company



Miss You Like Hell: La Jolla Playhouse

Comparables within the Space Professionally

Recruiting potentially from theatrical spaces
(Diversity of experience, background and skills)

Similar Duties, Different Name

Performer on Stage - Motion Capture, Voice Actor

Player - Audience

Costumes - Character Artist

Set - Environment Artist

Props - Systems Designer

Casting - HR

Stage Manager - Operations

Literally same duties, different medium

Lighting Artist

Director

Sound

Producer

Tespa Summer Retreat: Blizzard Entertainment

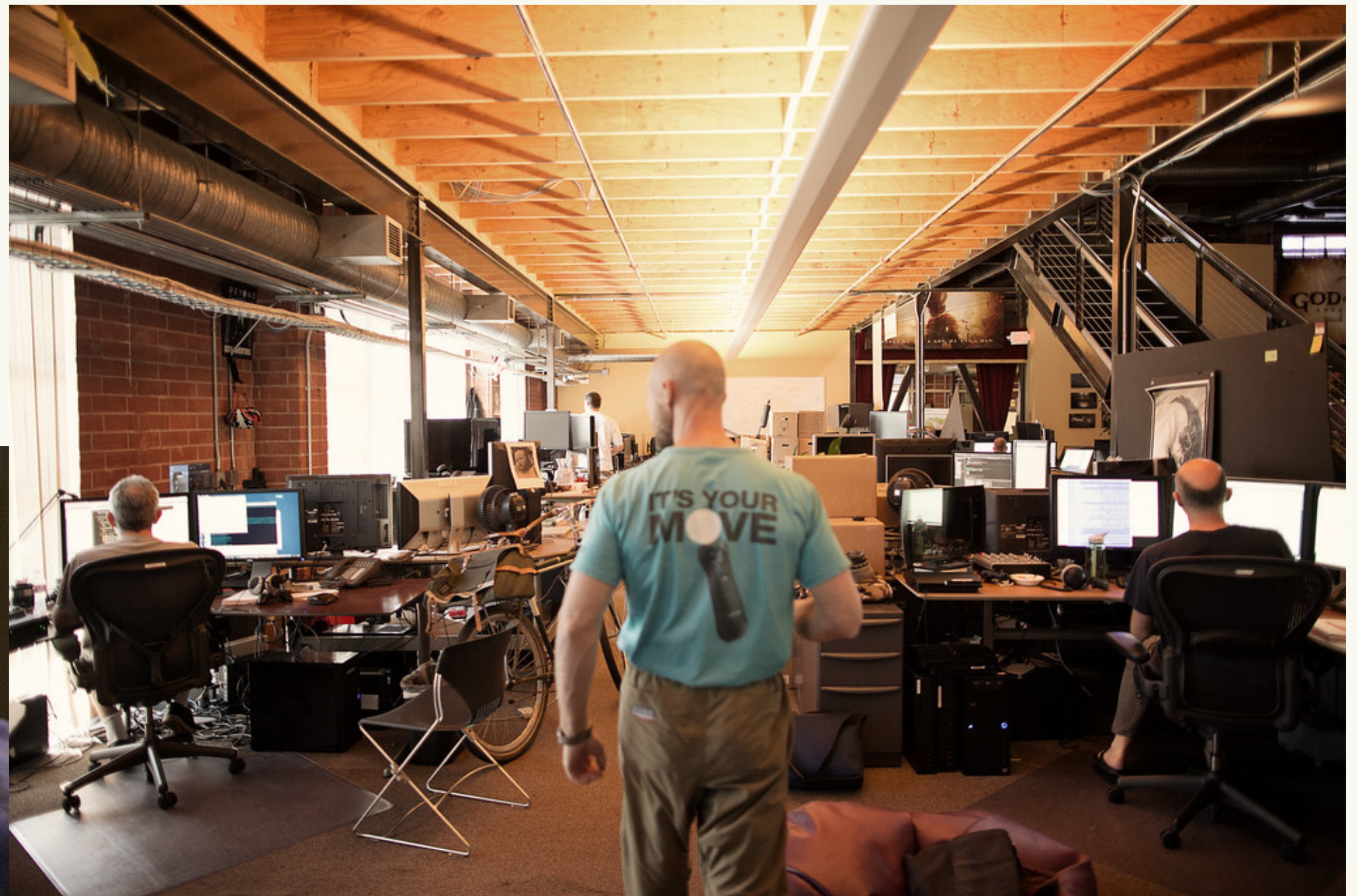


West Side Story: Jerome Robbins

Solves my question from that E3 hangout..why are there so many theatre kids in the games industry?

Similar roles or literally the same positions and practices. A path we should see as reasonable as computer science or tech.

"Read through" at The La Jolla Playhouse



Sony Santa Monica Studio

Conclusion

Thematically: There is a reason theatre kids flock to game development. It feels like home.

Practically: Use drama practices and principles to make your game stories, richer, more impactful and stronger.

Further Resources and Citations

- New Dramaturgy: International Perspectives on Theory and Practice by Katalin Trencsényi and Bernadette Cochrane
- Playful Production Process: For Game Designers (And Everyone) - To learn more about emotional beats within narrative structures and production pipelines
- Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy, edited by Magda Romanska
- Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book, edited by Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl, and Michael Lupu
- Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy by Michael Mark Chemers

Thank you to Professor Melinda Finberg of Critical Drama Studios, Hannah Nicklin, PhD and Professor Richard Lemarchand of Game Design at USC.



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