Planning Character Arcs

February 28th, 2014 by Chris Winkle

If you like to plan your stories ahead, you've almost certainly sketched out your plot. But have you planned your character arcs? Every story needs a character arc for its protagonist, even if it's simple or subtly conveyed. And while supporting characters don't always need an arc, stories are better off when they're included.

Luckily, characters arcs work very much like any other plot strand you might be working on. The difference is that they focus on inner events rather than external ones, which can make them harder to wrap your head around. If you have a character that needs an arc and you're not sure how to add one, these steps will get you started.

Spoiler Warnings: Stardust and Serenity. You can avoid spoilers by skipping the bulleted sections.

First, Establish the Problem

Start your character arc by showing your audience a character need or problem. During the course of the arc, you'll solve this issue. Often it's a sore point stemming from events in the character's past, but it can also be created by an unfortunate incident at the beginning of your story. Whatever it is, it should be deeply personal in nature. It's about how they feel, not whether they have a pair of socks that match or an umbrella to shield them from the rain.

If you want to stick to a simple arc that requires minimal character development, I recommend using an unfulfilled desire. Your character could long for freedom, knowledge, or glory. Characters like these are usually eager to go on an adventure to satisfy their longing.

If you want to put more focus on the character development in your story, I recommend a deeper issue of disillusionment or fear. Common ones include a disillusionment with parents, a fear of failure, or a fear of rejection. Don't spell this out for your audience. Instead, show them the symptom: a coping mechanism that causes your character to act out. This might be reluctance to introduce their parents to others, severe risk avoidance, or keeping people at arms' length. Characters of this type are generally reluctant heroes; their bad behavior is how they avoid their problem instead of facing it.

These two problem types can be combined to great effect. Your character might fear rejection, causing them to avoid people, and then fixate on obtaining an expensive AI to relieve their loneliness. They are no longer reluctant, just misguided.

Problems in Action:

- Ariel from The Little Mermaid desperately wants to live on land as a human. The audience knows this because like in most Disney films, she sings a song about it. Why she wants to be a human isn't explained; she'd be a stronger character if it was.
- Mal from Serenity became disillusioned after the end of a great civil war – in which he volunteered as a soldier on the losing side. Because he no longer has faith that good will come from fighting for a cause, he behaves in a self-serving manner. His backstory is fleshed out through character dialogue, and his self-serving behavior is demonstrated when he decides to throw River and Simon out of his ship.
- Tristan from the Stardust movie fears he is not good enough. He longs to win the heart of Victoria, the most beautiful girl in the village of Wall, because he wants outside validation of his worth. The audience can see he doesn't respect himself when he blindly followers her whims, causing him to lose his job. He also confides to his father, disheartened, that he's "not like the others."

Second, Create a Change

Unless the problem for your character arc was created at the beginning of your story, there is a reason why your character hasn't already solved their issue. Some aspect of the status quo has stifled them. Now you need to interrupt that status quo, throwing everything into the air. This

change shouldn't hand your character what they want on a silver platter, but it should provide an opportunity that wasn't there before. After the change, character growth is possible.

If you already have a plot for your story, look through your notes. The big change should be near the end of Act I, or, if you're using the [Hero's Journey](#) as your plot structure, it could be anywhere from the [Call to Adventure](#) to the [Crossing of the First Threshold](#).

If you have a reluctant hero with a coping mechanism, the change should render this coping mechanism useless. This won't feel like an opportunity for your character – it will feel like their worst nightmare. But it will force them to start facing their fear or disillusionment and grow as a person.

Change in Action:

- Ariel's secret stash of human artifacts is destroyed by her father, and he orders her to never go to the surface again. This brings her abruptly out of her daydreams, making her realize that without desperate measures, she will never achieve her goal.
- Mal witnesses River losing control at a tavern. He is forced to acknowledge that if he goes through with his self-serving plan of abandoning her, she and her brother will be captured, tortured, and possibly killed.
- Tristan extracts a promise from Victoria that if he ventures into the fairy realm and retrieves a shooting star, she will marry him. This motivates him to finally leave the village and explore the world.

Third, Make Stepping Stones

Now that character change is possible, you'll want to plot a course to your resolution. If you don't know what the resolution of your character arc is, stop right now and figure that out. In most cases it's pretty simple. If your character has a simple longing, it's when they get it. If your character is crippled by fear or disillusionment, it's when they overcome it. If they have a longing for something as a symptom of their fear or disillusionment, it's when they decide they don't need it anymore because they found the real solution to their issue.

Now create some baby steps for them to get to this goal. In a shorter work, I recommend three steps forward – like the three spirits that appear to Scrooge in the Christmas Carol. If you have a longer story, you'll want more steps, and some of them should take the character backward instead of forward. This will add tension and conflict.

Each step should challenge the hero by taking them out of their comfort zone just a bit, or by testing their commitment to achieving their dreams.

Stepping Stones in Action:

- Ariel signs a contract with the sea witch that will allow her to become human permanently if she charms the prince. Then she makes her way to the prince's palace, and tries to charm him into kissing her. With each step her dream is closer to becoming a reality.
- Mal decides to save River and her brother, even though it will put him and his crew in danger. When River escapes from confinement and takes over the ship's cockpit with a deadly weapon, he faces her unarmed, telling her he's risked everything on the belief that she's a human being. Finally, after discussing the idea of belief with Shepherd Book, he makes a bold move to discover the truth behind the government's attempt to capture her. In doing so, he inches toward making a stand for a cause he believes in.
- Tristan faces danger and successfully saves his companion Evane from a witch. After bravely facing danger a second time, he is rewarded by studying swordsmanship with a skilled air pirate. Finally, he learns Evane loves him. Each event boosts his confidence and self esteem.

Last, Test and Reward Them

By now your character should have made great gains toward their goal. Sometime around the climax of your plot, you'll need to test whether they've really learned their lesson, or are truly devoted to achieving their dream. It's all or nothing. Either they pass with flying colors, or they fail miserably, becoming a tragic hero.

Often, passing the test requires some sacrifice from the hero. Making this sacrifice proves to the audience that they have changed forever. If you have a misguided character, it's at this point that what they were seeking is freely offered to them. Their sacrifice is to give that item up.

After your character has taken this final test and your story is coming to a close, it's time to demonstrate the consequences to the character. If you have a tragic character that failed their test, they should be punished for it during the climax, possibly by dying. If they succeeded, their new-found commitment, strength, or enlightenment should bring them great rewards. You can make a reward scene especially strong by building parallels with the beginning of your story. Show them sailing through circumstances they once struggled with.

Tests and Rewards in Action:

- Ariel's quest seems hopeless after a mysterious woman shows up and steals Eric away. But when she realizes this woman is the sea witch, she becomes determined to get to the wedding boat and stop the marriage – even though she can no longer swim. Her determination makes her father realize how important being human is to her, and he grants her wish.
- Mal learns the terrible truth that the government is trying to keep hidden. He finally believes that by revealing this truth he can make a difference in the world – but doing so will probably cost him his life. He makes the choice to do it anyway, once again fighting

for what he believes in. In doing so, he converts the primary antagonist over to his side, allowing him to survive, heal, and make his way in the world as a more complete person.

- Tristan goes back to his home town and faces Victoria without Evane present. Victoria practically throws herself at him, but with his new confidence he sees that she's petty and self-absorbed. He turns her down, and then races off to save Evane. Doing so requires him to gather every bit of confidence he can muster. After he saves her and she saves him in return, he discovers he is the new king of the fairy realm.

More than anything, character arcs give a story its meaning. Your audience probably hasn't taken any trips to the fairy realm, but most have probably struggled with finding faith in themselves, faith in the world, or achieving their dreams. By thinking through the progression of your characters, you are building a connection between your story and the hearts of your readers.
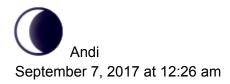
Comments

JK
May 20, 2016 at 6:34 pm

Minor correction: As much as I love the cockpit scene it's more that the "scorched Earth" tactics of The Operative that force Mal's hand by removing his old coping/lifestyle mechanisms, and force him to choose between"being hunted like an animal" vs "dying for a higher purpose" sort of transition.

rbingham2000
April 1, 2017 at 1:30 pm

The Operative's actions after the Maidenhead incident are an excellent example of a further Change (Step 2) which forces Mal to take action. Mal and the crew avoided Alliance attention before during the Firefly series by laying low on some planet out of their reach. But the Operative is ruthless enough to "leave no ground to go to" by destroying all the crew's available safe havens, leaving them with no way out.

Andi
September 7, 2017 at 12:26 am

Probably not the best place for this, but I swear I remembered reading an article on this website about negative character arcs (I believe the Star Wars Prequels were used to show Anakin's negative arc). Anyway, I've been searching EVERYWHERE for it to read it again and I cannot find it. Anyone know what I'm talking about?

[Chris Winkle](#)
September 7, 2017 at 9:44 am

By negative arc, do you mean one that turns a hero into a villain? I'm sure this isn't the specific article you are looking for, but we do have an article on that in case it's helpful: https://mythcreants.com/blog/transform-a-hero-into-a-villain-in-seven-steps/

B Curk
June 28, 2018 at 6:58 pm

Hi Andy, There's a multi-part article on Negative Character Arcs here>

https://www.helpingwritersbecomeauthors.com/negative-character-arc-1/

Juan
August 15, 2020 at 5:28 am

Concerning a story spread on three books, would it be problematic if the arc was spread too ? If at the end of the first book hasn't gotten to the test and reward, won't it feel unsatisfying for the reader ?

Cay Reet
August 15, 2020 at 8:08 am

Most likely yes, it will feel unsatisfying. In a series, every book should have its own arc, even if there's an arc which does run through all three books.

Cay Reet
August 15, 2020 at 8:09 am

Yes, it would be problematic. Every book needs it own arc, even if there's one running through all three of them. Merely cutting the story in three parts won't work satisfyingly for the reader.
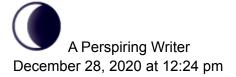
Cay Reet
August 15, 2020 at 8:10 am

Oops, posted the same content twice … sorry.

[Oren Ashkenazi](#)
December 28, 2020 at 11:37 am

Editor's note: I've removed a comment because it comes across as berating Cay Reet for an innocent mistake. Hopefully that was not the intent, but I need to err on the side of caution.

A Perspiring Writer
December 28, 2020 at 12:24 pm

Sorry. I didn't intend for it to come out that way.
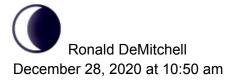
Oren Ashkenazi
December 28, 2020 at 12:57 pm

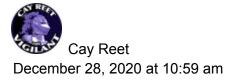That's okay, we all make wording mistakes sometimes.
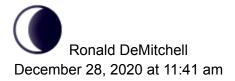

Bellis
August 15, 2020 at 8:38 am

I suspect the same advice as for other story arcs holds true here as well: Fractal plotting, so that each scene, each book and the series overall each have their own arcs nestled within each other (although not every scene needs a character arc necessarily). So for example, your character should have a growth arc within each book and have a test and reward in each book, but they can build on each other. The climax of the first and second book can be stepping stones towards the climax of the third book, which is also the climax of the series.

Ronald DeMitchell
December 28, 2020 at 10:50 am

Would it be possible to have a protagonist with a flat ark like in The Martian?

Cay Reet
December 28, 2020 at 10:59 am

It is possible, but not with every genre. Usually, people expect for the main character at least to undergo some change, to grow in some way. If you're putting a lot more focus on a plot which has nothing to do with the main character's inner workings, it would be possible not to have an arc for the character. Main characters in pulp stories, for instance, often don't have a character arc, because it's all about the action and not about character growth.

Ronald DeMitchell
December 28, 2020 at 11:41 am

Hi Cay, I was wondering if you could give me examples of additional genres that focus heavily on the action and not the character's internal ark.

Cay Reet
December 28, 2020 at 12:31 pm

Comedic stories usually focus more on outside shenanigans than on people evolving. Mystery stories are usually more focused on the mystery than on people learning something, too. In modern stories, especially in cosy mysteries, there's often a secondary love story which puts more focus on people, but in thrillers and regular mystery stories and many older stories, the main character doesn't necessarily learn something new or become a different person. The job of the detective is to detect, not to become a better person.