

Story Engineering Summary

These are all the notes I took while reading "Story Engineering" by Larry Brooks. I tried to add examples from the movie Dragonheart, or from a made up story in the Pokémon universe. Enjoy! :3

Intro - Disclaimers

Pantsing vs Planning

- Most creatives focus on aesthetics and prefer an artistic/organic approach - the story gets discovered while writing.
- This book teaches a more structured, planned approach, based on fixed principles i.e., a specific set of tools. (this book, and by extension post, is about that approach)
- You're searching for the story in both cases, i.e. end up with the same, so it's up to you to follow this book or not

Principles vs Art

- Many fear with an approach like that their stories will become rigid, formulaic, and predictable.
- One does not exclude the other. It's principles AND art. House Metaphor: Principles are the structural parts of a house (foundation, structural frame, walls, ceilings), and the art part is everything on top (paint job, facade, ornaments).
- Principles are a finite set of rules to consider, but not 100% hard set. Still, if you're gonna break a rule, do it with intention.
- There's a lot of writing wisdom out there, all valid! The following principles will help to focus on the "What" part first. The "how" Part afterwards then becomes art.
- These teachings are essential for mass appeal, i.e. getting published

Practice

- Writing is a profession that has to be learned like any other, and an instinct for the principles have to be learned in order to craft all the parts into a great whole.
- With regular practice you should develop a feeling for these questions:
 - Is the story **compelling**?
 - Is the hero actually **heroic**?
 - Is a **conflict** present?
 - Is every moment **related** to another aspect of the story?
 - Are the **structural** borders adhered to?
 - Is the **resolution** impactful?
 - What is the **essence** of Story?
- Being a writer is constant learning, developing, and practicing. Be open to new information, but also sit down and WRITE!

The Principles - 6 Core Competencies

The 6 Core Competencies

- List
 - Concept
 - Character
 - Theme
 - Structure
 - Scene Execution
 - Writing Voice
- They
 - answer the question: What goes where?
 - separate all info about story in easier digestible chunks, i.e. bring order to the chaos.

More

- The first 4 competencies don't have a particular order. You may begin with any of them, and develop the story from there.
- However, all 6 of them should relate, connect, and influence each other, none of them exist in a vacuum.
- They are ESSENTIAL for a story to work, fail or be sloppy on any one of them, and the others have to be extra good to compensate.
- Execute them properly (What?), and then use art (How?) to set yourself apart.

I - Concept

Idea to concept to premise

- An idea, not posing a dramatic issue, is not a concept, yet!
- Concept: A developed idea that could be a story. Poses a compelling "What if..." question which has the story as an answer.
- Premise: A concept that was deepened further with character.
- Dragonheart Example
 - Idea: A fantasy story about a knight and dragon working together.
 - Concept: What if a knight and a dragon band together against a tyrannical king?
 - Premise: A fallen knight and the last dragon become friends to defeat the knight's ward, who carries half the dragon's heart and becomes a tyrann.
- Pokémon Example
 - Idea: A story about a Pokémon trainer.
 - Concept: What if the Pokémon of a trainer, going for the top of the league, would actually die if they fall in battle? (Nuzlocke)
 - Premise: A young girl from Kanto fights her way to the top of an illegal underground league, to rescue her childhood Vulpix that was kidnapped and is now facing certain death in brutal Pokémon battles.

Concept Validation

- Process: Asking "What if..." questions:
 - Jump in and see where it leads you. It may lead you nowhere in which case the story might just not be worth telling.
 - May spark contradicting ideas - This is where you need to Decide one over the other!
 - May also go on forever - You need to decide when to stop.
 - For personal stories: Isolate what makes it compelling to YOU, and elevate this to become compelling to others
- When is the concept good enough?
 - This is always a guess, that becomes more precise with experience. It's art after all!
 - It should
 - i. provide something new and compelling **for others**, or at least a new perspective on familiar topics.
 - ii. resonate with the reader's own humanity.
 - iii. relate to the other competencies. Does the theme arise from it? Does Character?
 - iv. contain the most critical element: Conflict!
 - Validation questions
 - i. How unusual for the genre is your concept? (High vs. Low Concept)
 - ii. Do you still like it two weeks later?
 - Being marketable should never be your drive. Instead let yourself be driven by principles, Heart, passion, hope, and confidence - i.e. Decide!

II - Theme

- Theme: Is the connection from fiction to reality
 - Makes the story mean something in real life.
 - Makes the readers connect to the story.
 - Can be selling a certain opinion or exploring one.
 - Plot might work without it, but won't make the story meaningful.
- Theme is often said to emerge naturally, which is usually only the case with pro writers.
- Strategy tip: Build theme into character arcs.
- Dragonheart Example: Valor, virtue, righteousness, heroism
- Pokémon Example: The death of a "pet" can be as severe as losing a family member

III - Character

Contrary to popular belief, character is not the single most important aspect of story. It cannot stand on its own!

The most important characters

- Hero
 - Needs to be rich, deep and non-stereotypical, DUH!
 - Must go on a journey with something at stake, something has to change. (Character arcs)
 - Needs something that opposes him, e.g. inner demons or antagonistic force.
 - Don't do quirks for quirk's sake.
- The Opposition
 - Can be anything, the important thing is it has to oppose the hero.
 - There might be multiple different forces at play, also opposing each other.
 - Should be developed in equal depth like the hero.
- Empathy
 - The Hero needs to discover his shortcomings through experience, and most importantly overcome them - not 100%, though.
 - Your mission is to get the reader to empathize with the hero (even if he's a dick), which also is art.
 - Human psychology is very important for this

Dimensions of Character

- These 3 overarching character dimensions should show(!) during the story:
 - I - Outward Appearance + everyday behavior (What?)
 - II - Inwards motivation + backstory (Why?)
 - III - Decisions and behaviour, when it counts (Who?)
- Variables, should be blended into the narrative
 - Wants, Needs, Ghosts
 - Surface affections, personality, worldview
 - Backstory, inner demons, inner conflicts
 - Character arc, decisions
- Backstory
 - The past is an explanation for how characters might behave, but it doesn't dictate the decisions they make.
 - Take care to make it so that the current character behavior makes sense
 - Backstory is a contextual tool, developed as needed, Tip: don't write more than 10% beforehand (Iceberg)
 - Inner Demons: An aspect of humanity not in line with the rules of the world.

More

- Give your characters moments to react, fuelled by dimension II, show III, and overcome I
- Don't go too deep into all characters, only go deeper for the hero and the antagonist.

IV - Structure

Structure is about linking all of the different parts of story, and making a coherent thing out of them. All stories are divided into 4 parts (even the classic 3 acts), that dictate what may happen when.

Part 1 - Setup

- Spans the first 20-25% of the story (pacing).
- Begins with an opening Scene.
- Should contain an early **Hook**: A compelling question the audience absolutely wants an answer to.
- Contains an **Inciting Incident**: Something new happening that changes the hero's normal life.
- Ends with **Plot Point 1**: The moment the hero actively decides to go on the journey.
 - Introduces an antagonistic force
 - Raises the stakes
- Your Missions in Part 1
 - Hook the audience as early as possible.
 - Make the audience emphasize with the hero (regular world).
 - Show what the hero stands to lose (stakes).
 - Create a feeling of impending change (foreshadow the antagonistic force).
 - Confront the hero with new challenges.
 - Show all 3 dimensions of character, and show a character that still has to grow
 - Aim for Plot Point 1
- In order to get published this part is the most important one.

Part 2 - Reaction

- Hero changes into react mode (react to **Plot Point 1**, the antagonist)
 - They stumble around, experiment, and explore their options.
 - They may attempt a solution, but still have to fail.
 - They cannot be too heroic, yet.
 - React, escape, deny -> retreat, regroup, collect options -> setup Pinch Point -> react to pinch point -> work towards mid point
- Contains **Pinch Point 1** (see below)
- Ends with the **Mid Point**
 - Is located roughly at 50% of the story.
 - New information is revealed that raises the stakes for the hero.
 - The new information is related to the hero, but may also just be shown to the audience.

Part 3 - Attack

- Begins After the **Mid Point**, and the hero switches from react to attack mode.
 - They become proactive.
 - They achieve first successes against the antagonistic force.
- Contains Pinch Point II: The antagonistic force also has evolved and got stronger.
- Ends with Plot Point II:
 - At roughly 75% of the story.
 - The Hero gets all the information needed to defeat the antagonist, and overcomes their inner demons.
 - This is the last moment, where new information may be revealed.

- This is the last opportunity for any kind of foreshadowing.
- May be preceded by a pre-second-plot-point-lull: A moment of absolute hopelessness

Part 4 - Resolution

- The hero is ready to face off against the antagonist with a willingness to sacrifice everything.
- Missions
 - Hero must cause resolution themselves (no deus ex machina).
 - Show a hero who has grown and either changed themselves or their surroundings.
 - Hero should be exceptionally heroic.
 - Plan the ending ahead.
 - Most importantly: NO NEW INFORMATION MAY BE REVEALED!

More

- The most important story milestones
 - The 8 most important points in a story, everything else is transition.
 - Could basically be the structure of the entire story.
 - They are: Opening scene, Hook, Inciting incident, Plot Point 1, Pinch Point 1, Midpoint, Pinch Point 2, Plot Point 2, Final Resolution
- Foreshadowing: A promise or hint at something that may or may not be kept.
- Pinch Points: Reminders of the opposition's power and threat.
 - The simpler and more direct the better.
 - Don't need to involve the hero, but need to be experienced by the reader in relation to the hero.

Example: Dragonheart

Dragonheart has a pretty elaborate prologue on which the same structure actually can be applied, as well as to the main plot.

- Prologue
 - Hook: There's a revolt of peasants.
 - Inciting Incident: Einon jumps into the battle and gets injured.
 - Plot Point 1: Aislinn decides to ask a dragon for help.
 - Pinch Point 1: Einon apparently dies.
 - Midpoint: The dragon heals Einon by giving him half his heart.
 - Pinch Point 2: Einon plans to rebuild the roman castle.
 - Plot Point 2: Bowen prevents Einon from blinding the peasant.
 - Resolution: Bowen swears revenge on the dragon.
- Main plot
 - Hook: A dragon attacks.
 - Inciting Incident: Bowen meets Draco, who gives him a hard time.
 - Plot Point 1: Bowen decides to agree to Draco's "alternative".

- Pinch Point 1: Bowen's duel against Einon, who reveals his cruelty openly.
- Midpoint: Bowen rekindles his knightly vows and starts leading the peasant revolt against Einon.
- Pinch Point 2: Dragonslayers!
- Plot Point 2: Draco is injured, when Einon is hit by Brother Gilbert.
- Resolution: Bowen sacrifices Draco to save everyone.

V - Scene Execution

- Scene: A dramatic unit standing at a specific time and a specific location
 - Scenes are the literal building blocks of the story
 - A chapter might contain multiple scenes.
 - Each scene has a mission.
- Scenes should
 - mimic the larger structure in stakes, tension, etc.
 - include only ONE piece of exposition, each.
 - move the story forward.
- You either setup, respond to the setup, attack the problem, or resolve it.
- Setting descriptions should only be used to describe or deepen character action.
- Cut-And-Thrust (cliffhangers): End each scene with a question, but then be aware of the next scene's mission.

VI - Writing Voice

- Writing Voice: Your unique style.
- Be intentional not eloquent
 - Don't try to find the most beautiful words
 - Don't try to copy someone else's writing style
 - Words are not as important as what actually happens.
 - Take care that dialogue reflects how people actually talk.
- Practice makes perfect, Writing Voice is something that grows over a long time.

Outro - One particular way to get it done

One straightforward way to plan your story can be done with a so-called Beat Sheet.

Beats Sheet: A list of bullet points defining each of the story's scene

- Begin with one word for each Scene.
- Expand the words into a generic sentence.
- Expand the generic sentences into specific sentences.
- Expand them into a short paragraph.
- Iterate until satisfied.