# SIMPLE STORY STRUCTURE

To plan a story, an emotional journey with dizzying highs and abysmal lows, can seem impossible in the chaos of 5 unique players. Frameworks to corral your ideas and focus in on the elements that will help you achieve that story ideal might be all you need.

Mark Twain famously said "There is no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope." The classic Heroes Journey framework, is, it's unsuited for TTRPGs. The issues one runs into are its general feeling of finality (beginning to end), the need to be able to control the protagonist, and its single-protagonist centric nature. A group of players, each playing the protagonist, week after week, needs a more flexible story structure, something episodic.

Dan Harmon (showrunner of *Community* and *Rick & Morty* fame) took the Heroes Journey and adapted it for episodic TV. He created the Story Circle. *Community* had multiple protagonists dealing with challenges as stories unfolded in each episode, series of episodes, and full seasons. This structure is perfect for TTRPGs. So into the kaleidoscope, it goes. We did some adaptation of the Story Circle, and now use this sctructure to plan every single session and campaign, it hasn't failed us yet. The story starts at **Current** and progresses clockwise, taking our players through a truly dynamic journey.
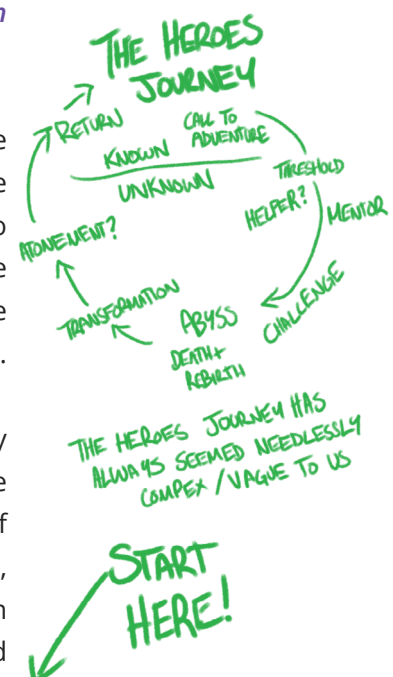
Why we love this framework:

1. It stays surprisingly malleable, so you can shift as needed to the events in your game.

2. It greatly rewards practice. Once or twice around and you'll likely find a really comfortable rhythm to your sessions and campaigns.

3. Players will usually experience profound character growth as a result of their adventures by virtue of the difficult choices and outcomes they have experienced.

4. The movement between order and chaos means players get to feel in control sometimes regardless of the ruleset or playstyle.

4. This flow can be applied on a session level all the way to campaign scale. You can even embed a full story circle in a single stage of another story circle... Woah, head-trip!

Aftermath Outcomes of their choices are demonstrated. The heroes, people, and world affected are revisited.	**Current** Establish what normal looks like. Introduce a problem that exists. Add foreshadowing if possible.	**Hook** Provide a potential solution to the problem. Show reasons for action by interacting with those affected by the problem.
Climax The characters struggle to overcome their obstacle. Lessons from recent events may help them.	**Order** / **Chaos**	**Kick-Off** An event causes the problem to become impossible to ignore by affecting the players directly.
Suffer They suffer a difficult setback. All seems lost. Their perseverance is what makes them heroic.	**Choice** They arrive at their solution but it is not as simple as assumed. A difficult choice or challenge presents itself.	**Challenge** One or a few obstacles present themselves on their path to their assumed solution.

THE HEROES JOURNEY

RETURN CALL TO ADVENTURE
KNOWN
UNKNOWN THRESHOLD
HELPER? MENTOR
ATONEMENT?
CHALLENGE
TRANSFORMATION ABYSS
DEATH + REBIRTH

THE HEROES JOURNEY HAS ALWAYS SEEMED NEEDLESSLY COMPEX / VAGUE TO US

START HERE!

Order and Chaos

The circle is divided into top and bottom halves. Order is where players (or protagonists) and the world they inhabit are largely in control, and the story reacts to their decisions. On the flip side is chaos, where the events are meant to feel not only out of control but out of THEIR control, putting them into a reactionary state. A simple dungeon crawl is made of three parts; the players prepare and journey to the dungeon (order, they drive), the players slowly map the dungeon with dangers and traps around every corner (chaos, they react), and they fight a boss to return with loot (return to order, they drive). This repeating flow perfectly provides a sense of progress to the experiences of heroes.
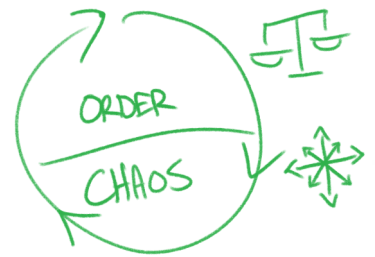
Current

This stage establishes the current normal for the players, anticipating that whatever normal is being highlighted is one that will soon be changed. Each element you spend time on has a counterpoint to potentially disrupt later in the story.

Hook

A problem is presented to the players, this is often presented by NPCs or quest-givers. Make notes of potential solution(s) to present in-game. You can also find small ways of highlighting the impact of the problem on the world if the worst was to happen.

Kick-Off

The problem becomes impossible to ignore. This stage is meant to present new events or information that forces action from the players, thereby starting the quest or adventure. This is the first step into chaos or the beginning of their quest into the unknown.

Challenge

The party is presented with one or a few obstacles along their path to reaching their goal. These are little challenges designed to be overcome. Their struggle here may also teach them something that will later become key to their success in the Climax stage.

Choice

Their goal is reached but they discover it's not quite as simple as they first thought. This is where we present a choice or catch to their original plan. This is not meant to be a pass/fail. Ideally, either choice moves them forward but with potential negatives to both.

Suffer

The players suffer a setback. This setback makes their perseverance heroic. Emotional losses can be devastating here. Players are meant to feel as if their fight may be hopeless. In a pinch, deus ex machina can help if the players can't find a path forward.

Climax

This stage is where the players face their problem. Friends, items, or lessons learned on the journey can become the key to success against their problem. This can legitimately end in triumph or failure because they will soon be back at the Current stage again.

Aftermath

Here we deal with the consequences of their journey. What has changed within them, around them, and to NPCs they care about as a result of their actions? Note the results and repercussions, and how they might discover those results to bring the world to life.

Instructions:

1. The circle starts at the **Current** stage and progresses clockwise. Play through the stages in order.

2. Start wherever your inspiration strikes. If you have a fight in mind for the **Climax** or a event to use in the **Kick-Off**, start there.

3. Bounce around while you plan. **Current**, **Kick-Off**, **Choice**, and **Climax** are often the first ideas. The rest of the steps tend to bridge the gaps and build up the impact of those four stages.

4. You'll probably find that you can deviate from your plan easier because you know the next stages purpose and what it should *feel* like.

AFTERMATH	CURRENT	HOOK
OUTCOMES OF THEIR CHOICES EXPLORED	ESTABLISH NORMAL, HIGHLIGHT PROBLEM	POINT TOWARD SOLUTION TO PROBLEM

CLIMAX		KICK OFF
STRUGGLE TO WIN USING JOURNEY LESSONS		PROBLEM BECOMES IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE

ORDER
PLAYERS DRIVE AND FEEL IN CONTROL OF THE SITUATION

PLAYERS ARE RESPONDING TO NEW CHALLENGES CONTANTLY

CHAOS

SUFFER	CHOICE	CHALLENGE
A DEVASTATING BLOW, ALL SEEMS LOST	ESTABLISH NORMAL, INTRODUCE PROBLEM	RELATED OBSTACLES ON THEIR JOURNEY

*These concepts and structure have been adapted from the Story Circle by Dan Harmon

HOOK CHANCE