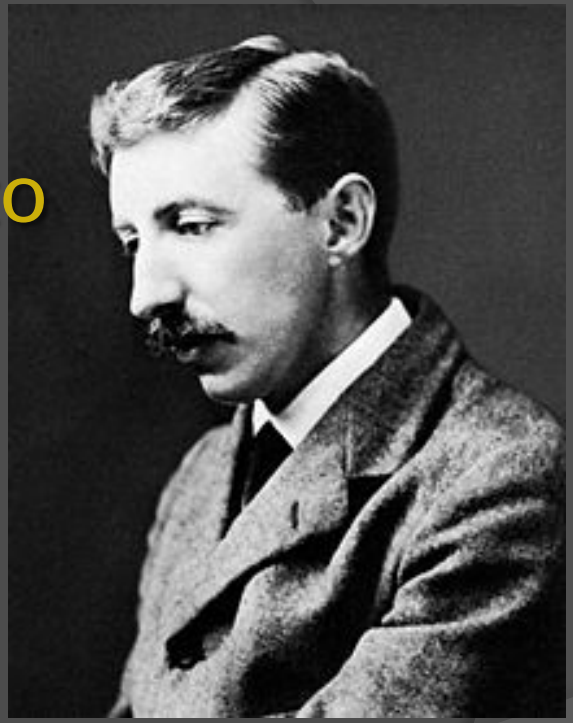
REIMAGINING STORY STRUCTURE

Moving Beyond 3-Acts in Narrative Design

Jeremy Bernstein
Freelance

"[Story] has only one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next.



And conversely, it can only have one fault: that of making the audience **NOT** want to know what happens next."

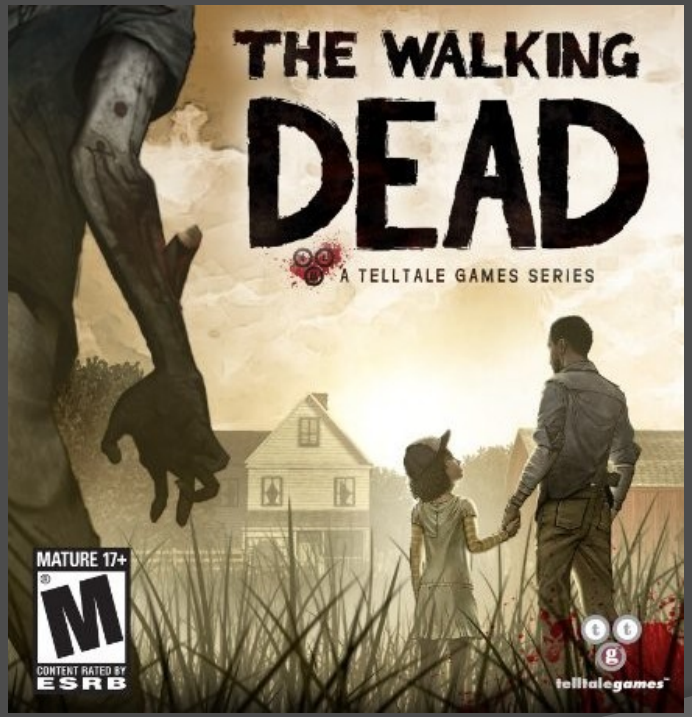
--E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Nove*

"[Story] has only one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next.

And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next."

--E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel,* 1927

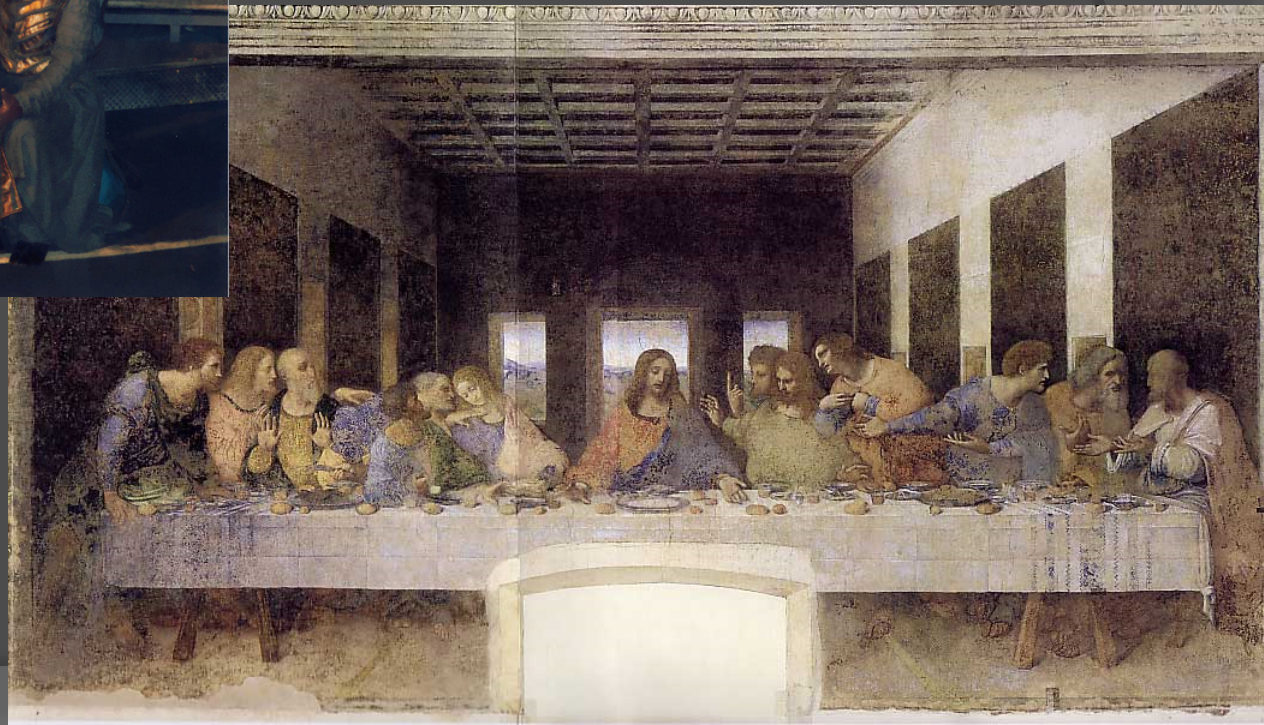
BIOSHOCK
INFINITE


THE WALKING
DEAD
A TELLTALE GAMES SERIES
MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB
telltalegames

NAUGHTY DOG
THE LAST OF US

Failure of Story = Failure of Structure

Stories in games? Really? Must we?



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Who Am I?

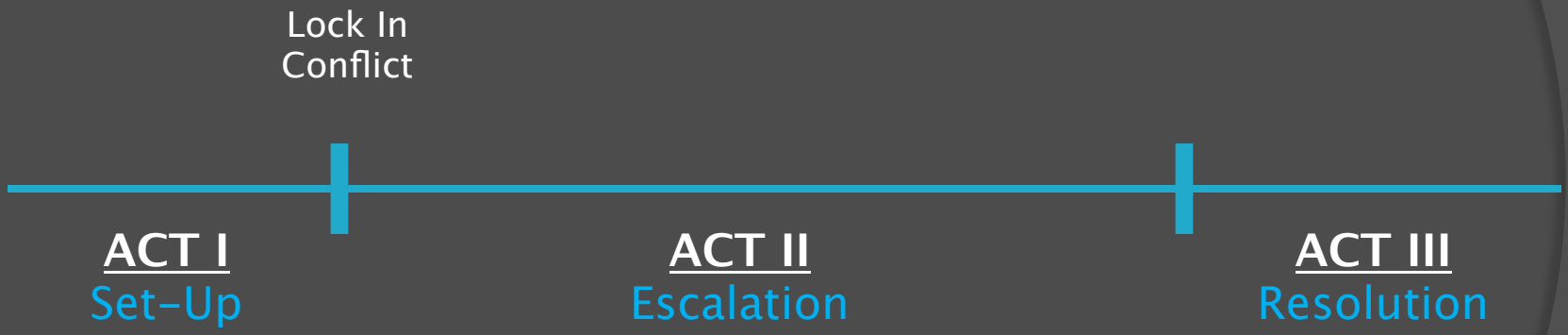
NAUGHTY DOG
THE LAST OF US

LEVERAGE

HOLLYWOOD

STAR
WARS

3-Act Structure



3-Act Structure

Lock In
Conflict

Crisis Point
(Low Point)

ACT I
Set-Up

ACT II
Escalation

ACT III
Resolution

The “Act 2” Problem

The “Act 2” Problem

The “Act 2” Problem

- Confusion
  - “Why am I doing this?”
- Repetition
  - “Didn’t I already do this?”
- Stagnation
  - “Am I still doing this?”
- Padding
  - “Zzzzzzzzzz…”

“4”-Act Structure

Lock In Conflict

Midpoint

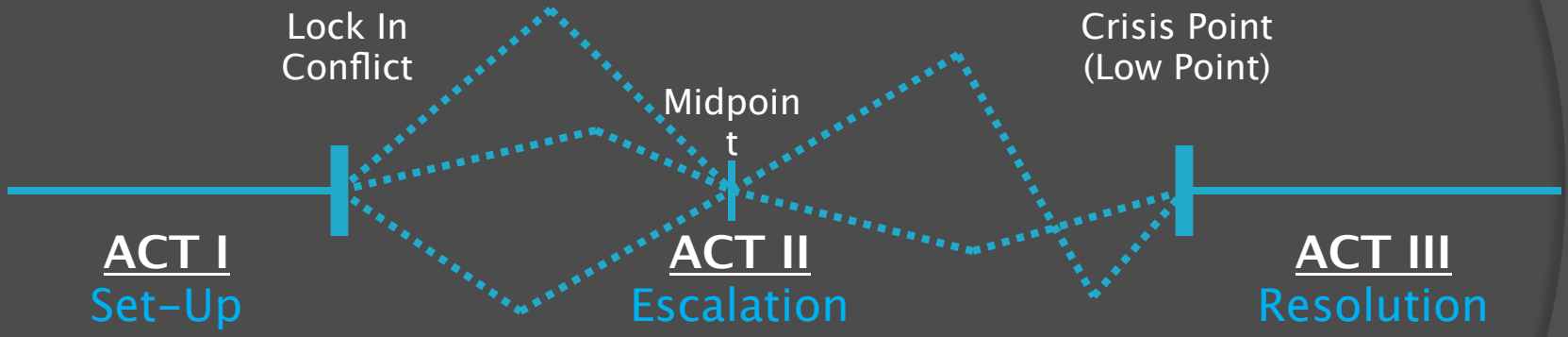
Crisis Point (Low Point)

ACT I
Set-Up

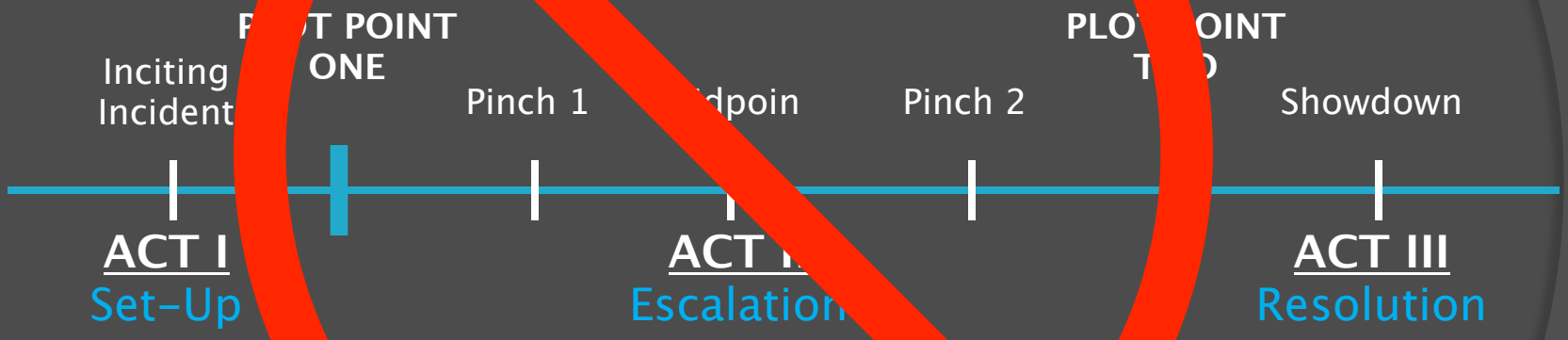
ACT II
Escalation

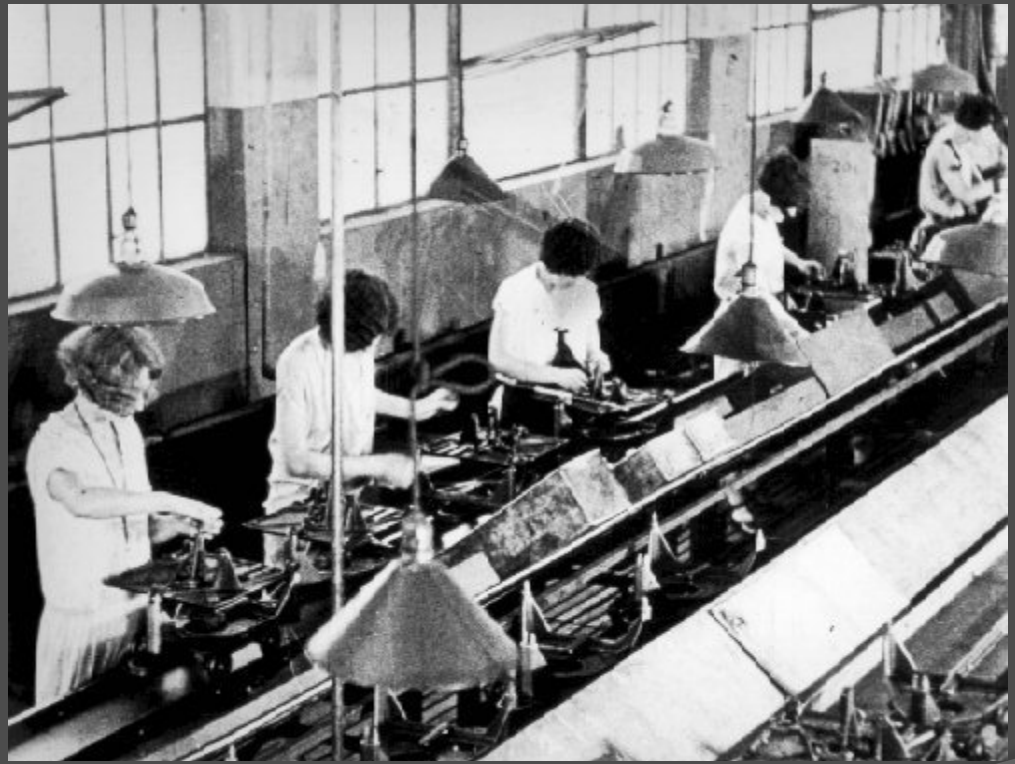
ACT III
Resolution

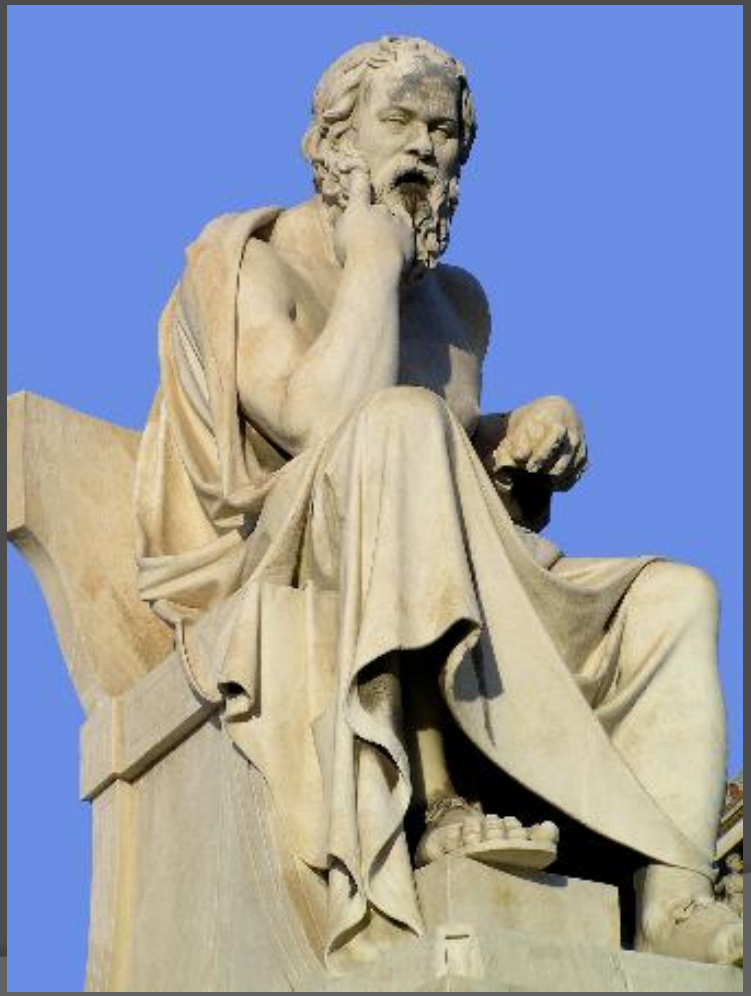
“4”-Act Structure



Syd Field Structure



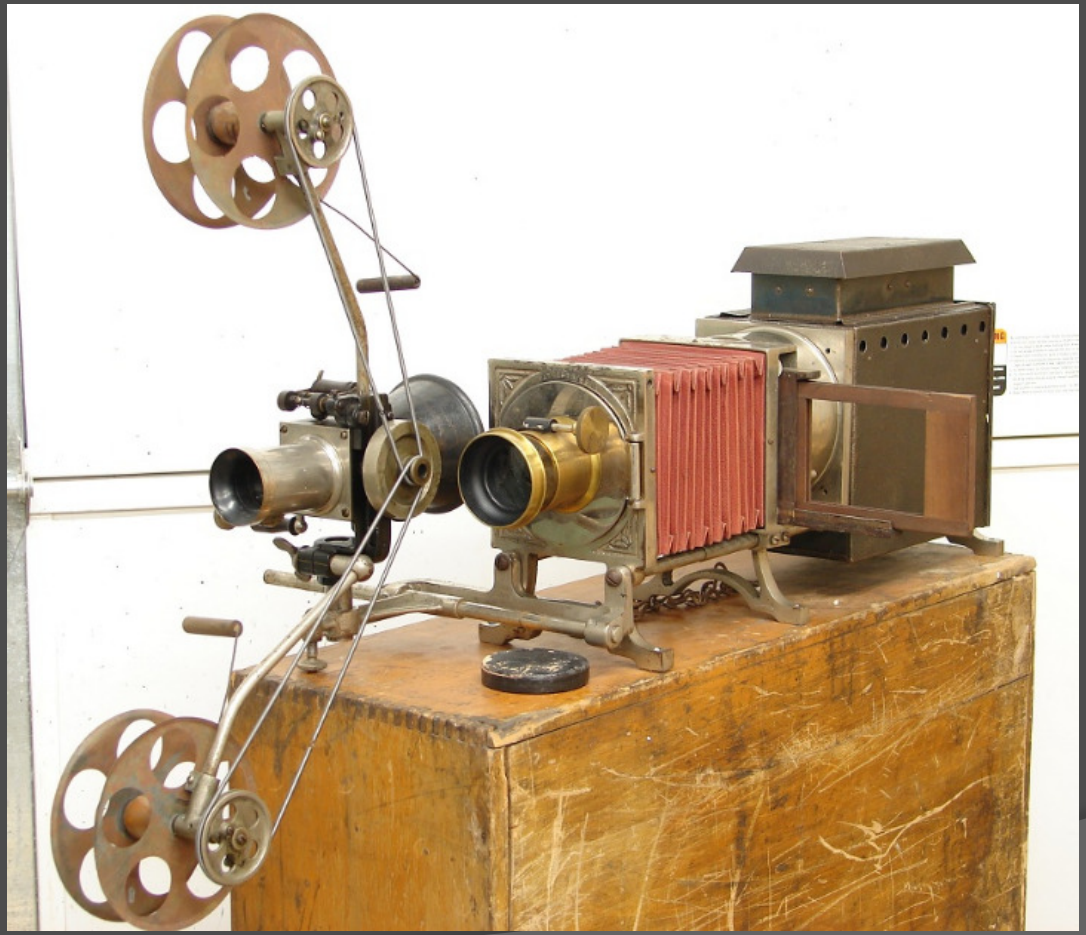




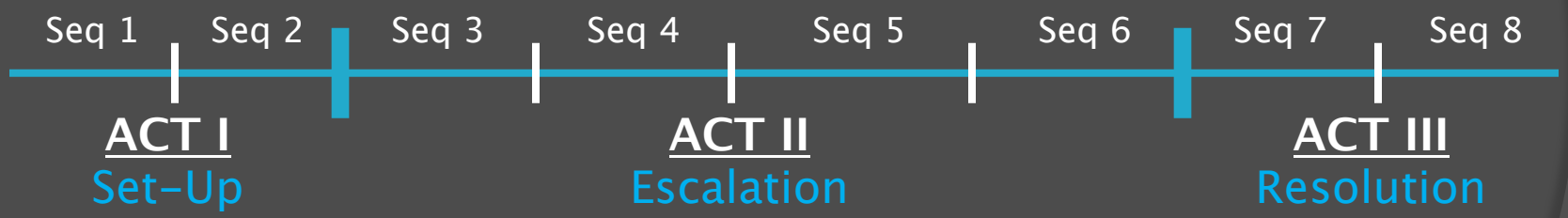
Sequence Structure

Frank Daniel

Head of film program at Columbia and USC



Sequence Structure



Story: A Definition

Someone who wants something badly and is having a hard time getting it.

OBJECTIVE

OBSTACLE

Sequence Structure is OBJECTIVE DRIVEN

FEAR

HOPE

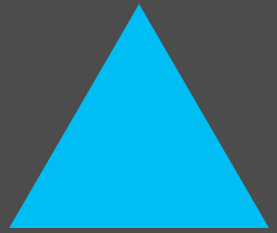
Someone who wants something badly and is having a hard time getting it.

Will they get what they want?

Main Tension

FEAR

HOPE



Main Tension

Sequence Structure is EXPERIENTIAL

Challenge
Fear
Frustration
Flow
Boredom
Ability
Hope

Sequence Structure

Sequence Structure

LOST

Nested Goals

I want to buy a horse… BUT, I need gold.

So I go to the dungeon to get gold… BUT, I need a key.

So I go to the Wizard to get the key…BUT, I need to give him magic herbs.

So I go out to gather the herbs… BUT, I have to bribe the trolls…

So I have to kill the Goblin King… BUT the Goblin King is impervious to normal weapons…

…to catch the dog…

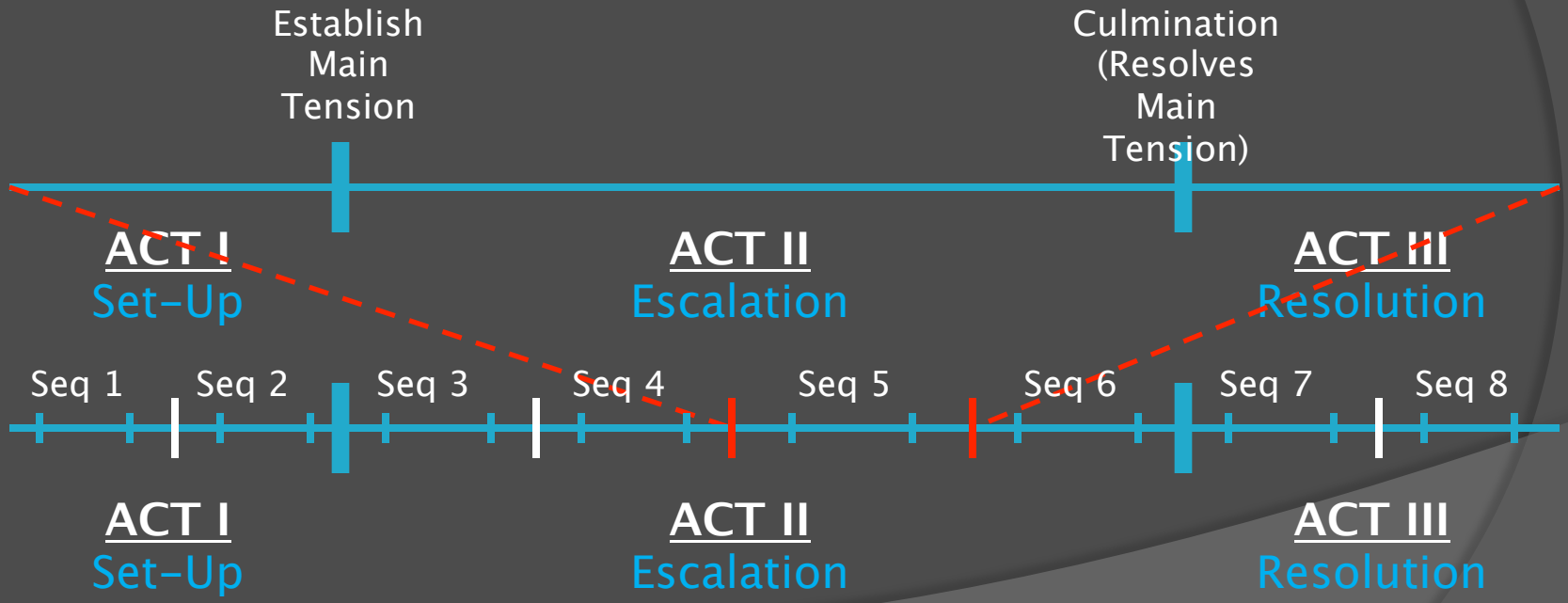
…to catch the cat…

Sequence Structure

Sequence Structure is CAUSAL

Sequence Structure is FRACTAL

Sequence Structure



Star Wars- Act 2

Will Luke get the Death Star Plans to the Rebels?

TENSION: Will Luke get to Alderaan?

TWIST: The Empire is alerted to their presence.

TENSION: Will they rescue the Princess?

TWIST: The Empire follows them out.

TENSION: Will they get to the Rebels?

TWIST: The Empire is on the Death Star!

TENSION: Will they escape the Empire?

TWIST: The Empire is alerted to their presence.

TENSION: Will they follow them out?

Sequence Structure

Each Sequence has its own:

- Tension
- Resolution
- Twist

…that establishes the next Tension

“Because” Storytelling > “And Then” Storytelling

“And Then” Storytelling

We went to the Princess’s Castle…

…AND THEN…

…we fought a dragon…

…AND THEN…

…we found a unicorn…

“Because” Storytelling

We went to the Princess’s Castle…

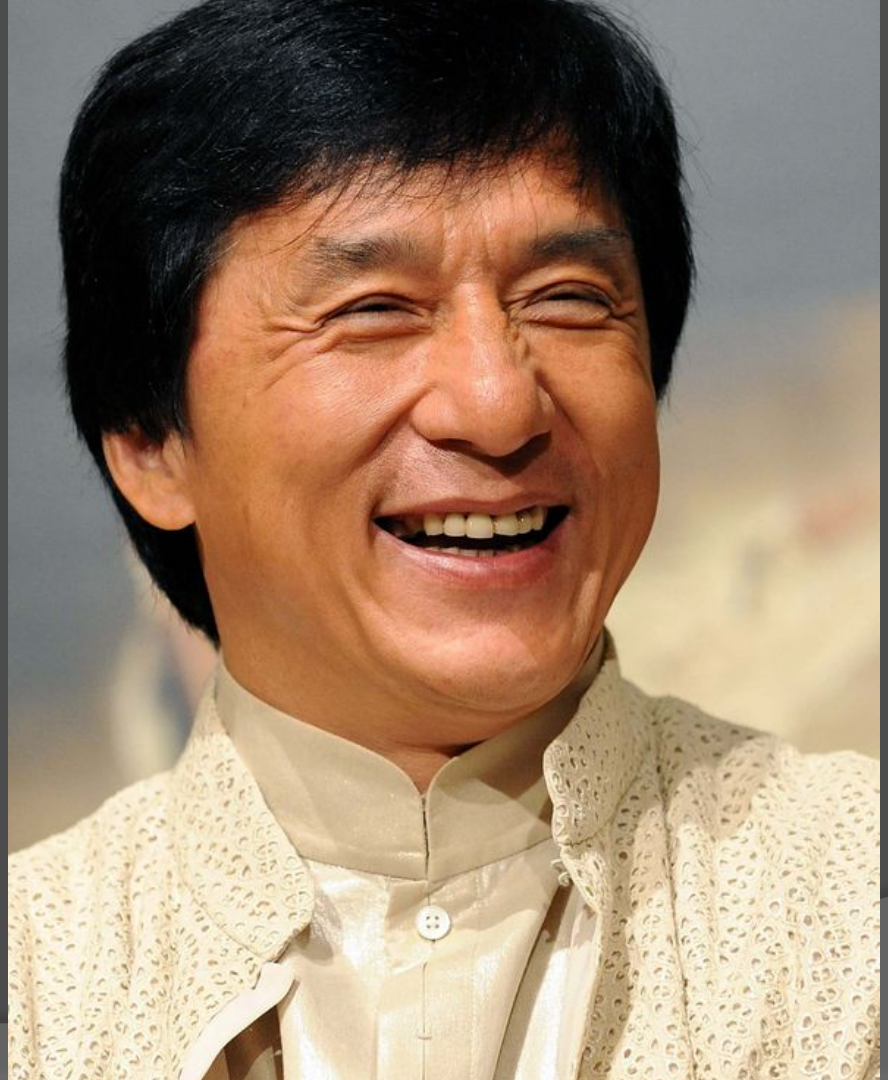
…BUT when we got there, a dragon was attacking it.

SO, BECAUSE we went to the Castle…

…we fought a dragon.

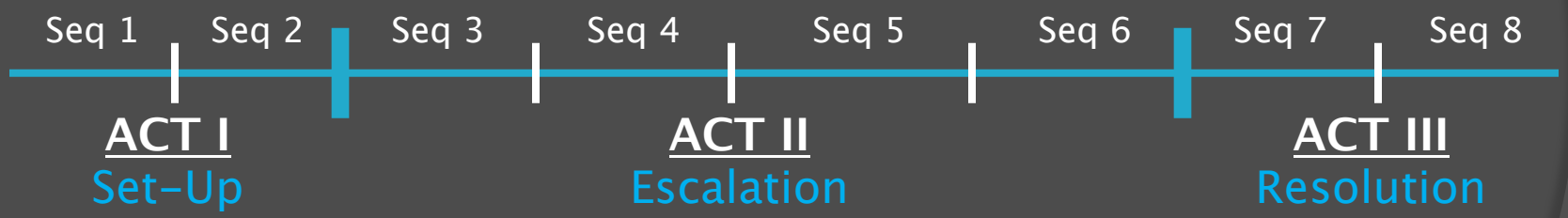
BUT in killing it, the knight was injured.

SO, BECAUSE we fought a dragon…

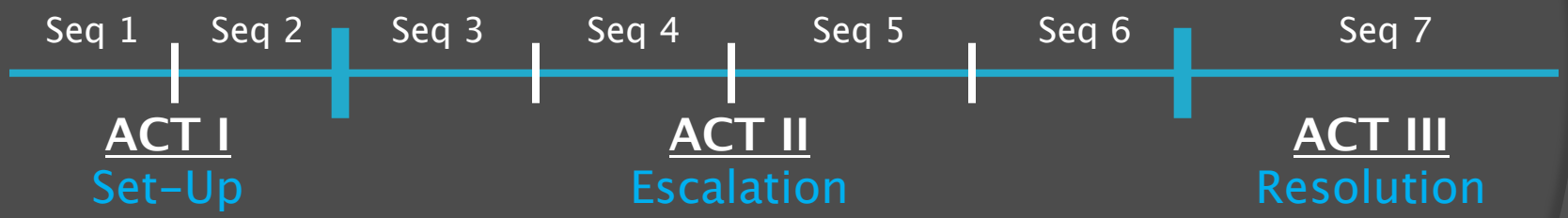


Sequence Structure is FLEXIBLE

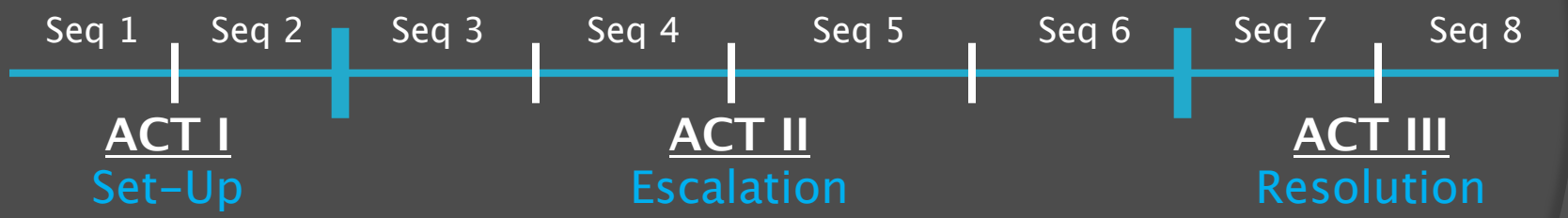
Sequence Structure



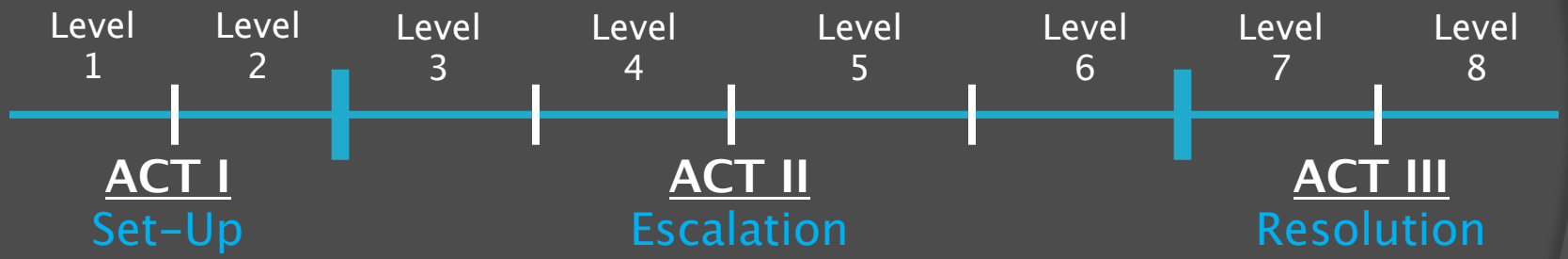
Star Wars


Seq 1
Seq 2
Seq 3
Seq 4
Seq 5
Seq 6
Seq 7
ACT I
Set-Up
ACT II
Escalation
ACT III
Resolution

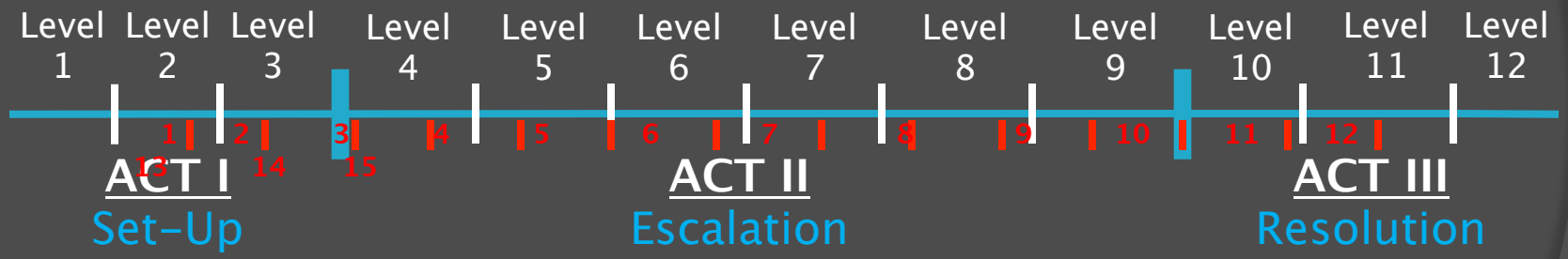
Sequence Structure



Game Structure

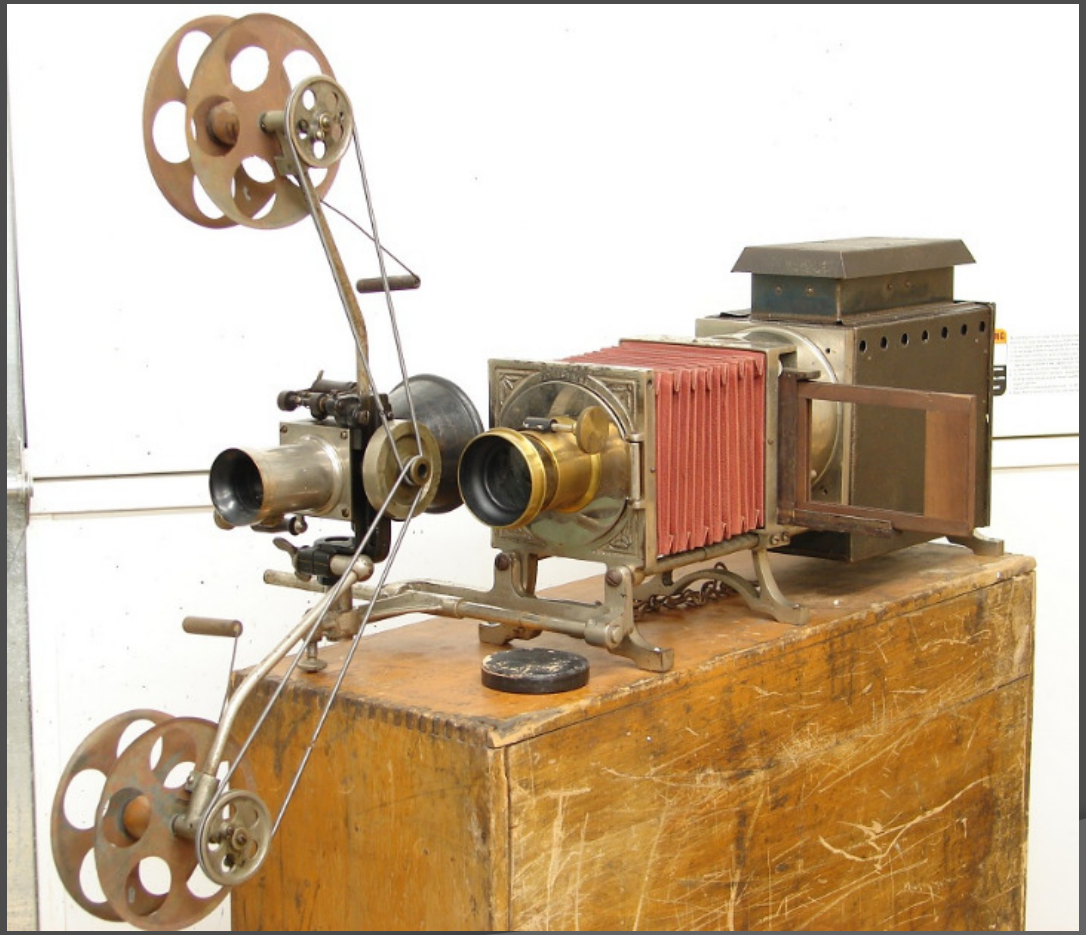


Dead Space 2


Level 1
Level 2
Level 3
Level 4
Level 5
Level 6
Level 7
Level 8
Level 9
Level 10
Level 11
Level 12
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
ACT I
Set-Up
ACT II
Escalation
ACT III
Resolution

Sequence Structure

- Objective Driven
- Experiential
- Causal
- Fractal
- Flexible



Sequence Structure in Games

Sequence Structure:

- Objective Driven
- Experiential
- Causal
- Fractal
- Flexible

The “Act 2” Problem:

- Confusion
- Repetition
- Stagnation
- Padding

The “Act 2” Problem

- Confusion ??
  - “Why am I doing this?”
    - Objective Driven
    - Causal

Halo

TWISTENSION: Will you are looking for the super-weapon?

TENSION: Will you find the weapon, and not the Covenant do?

TENSION: Will you stop the Zombie Plague by killing EVERYTHING!

TENSION: Will you stop Halo from killing EVERYTHING!?

The “Act 2” Problem

- Repetition
  - “Didn’t I already do this?”
    - Objective Driven
    - Causal

Star Wars- Act 2

TWIST: The Empire destroys Alderaan!

TWIST: The Princess is on the Death Star!

TWIST: The Empire is alerted to their presence.

TWIST: The Empire follows them to the Rebels.

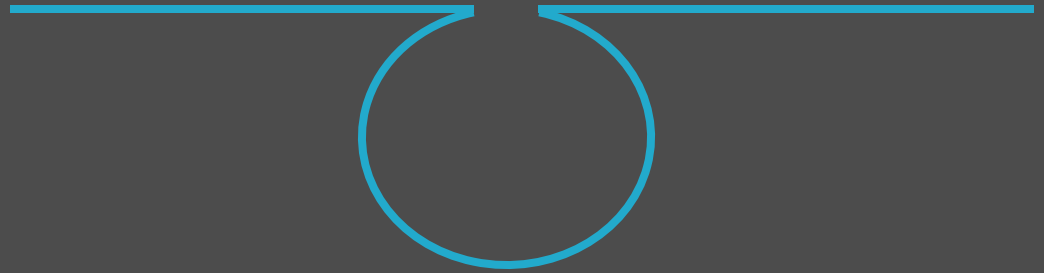
The “Act 2” Problem

- Stagnation
  - “Am I still doing this?”
    - Fractal

The “Act 2” Problem

- Padding
  - “Zzzzz”
    - Objective Driven
    - Causal

“The door is blocked. I’ll have to find a way around.”

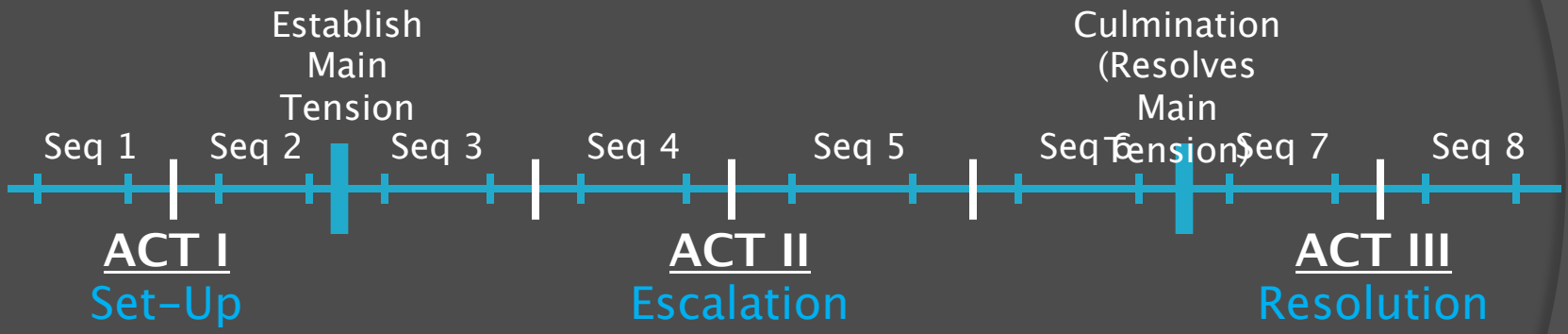


JOCKEY
Fink Manufacturing Co.
COME SEE THE FUTURE OF
POWER
AT THE
HALL OF HEROES

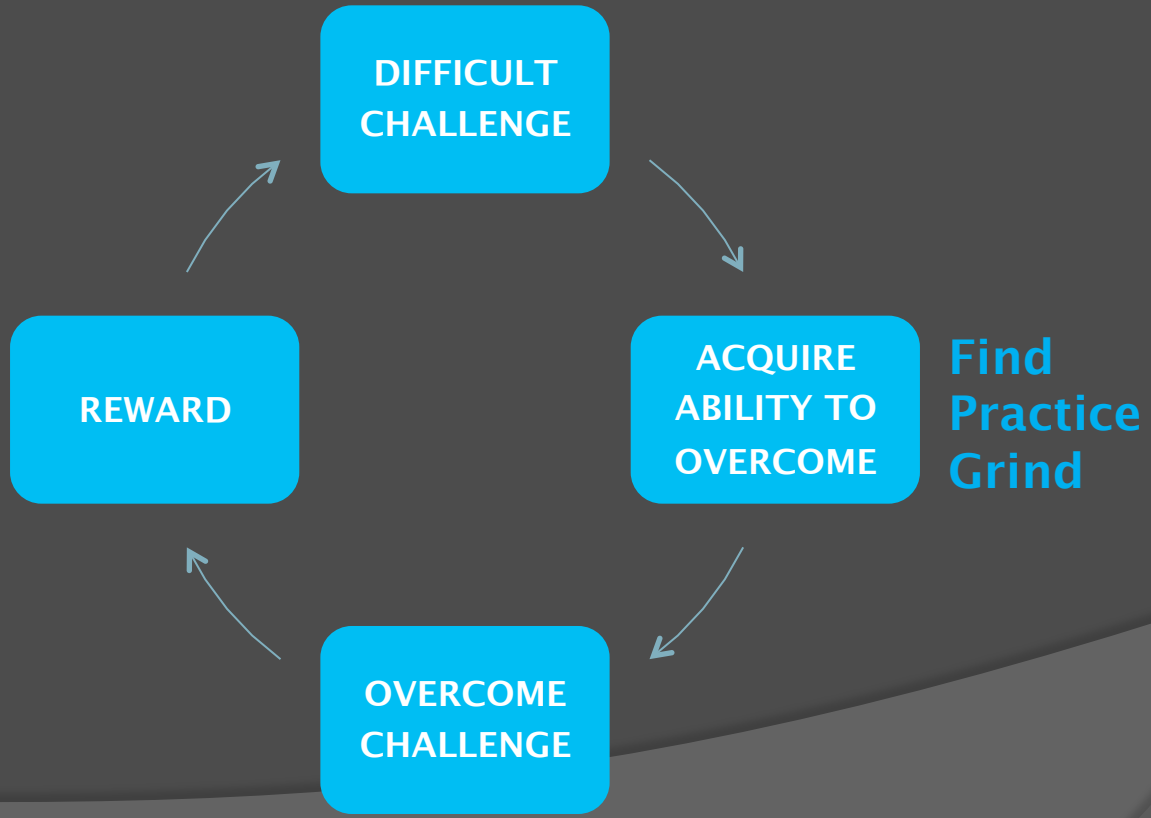
The “Act 2” Problem

- Padding
  - “Zzzzz”
    - Objective Driven
    - Causal
    - Fractal

Sequence Structure



Gameplay Loops



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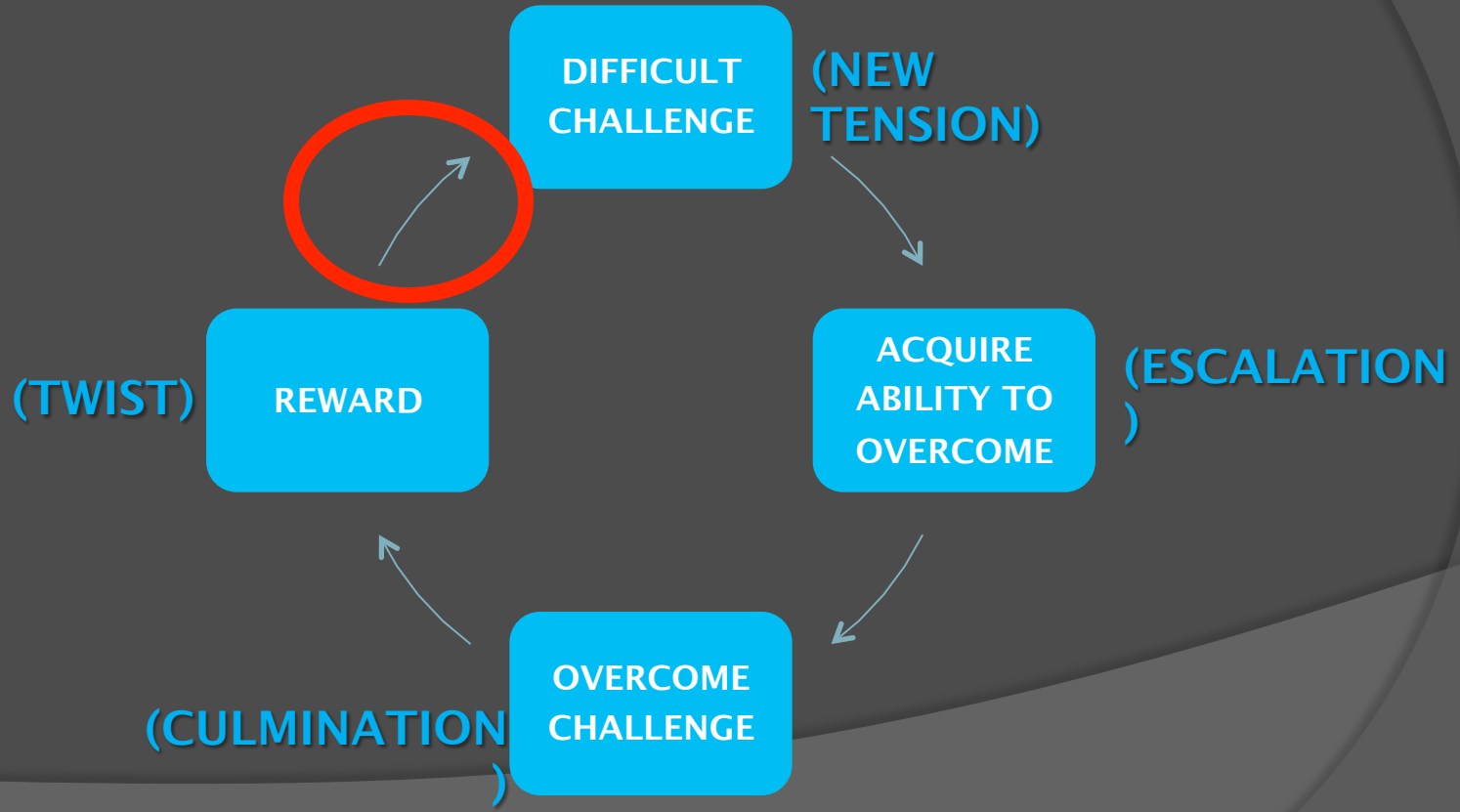

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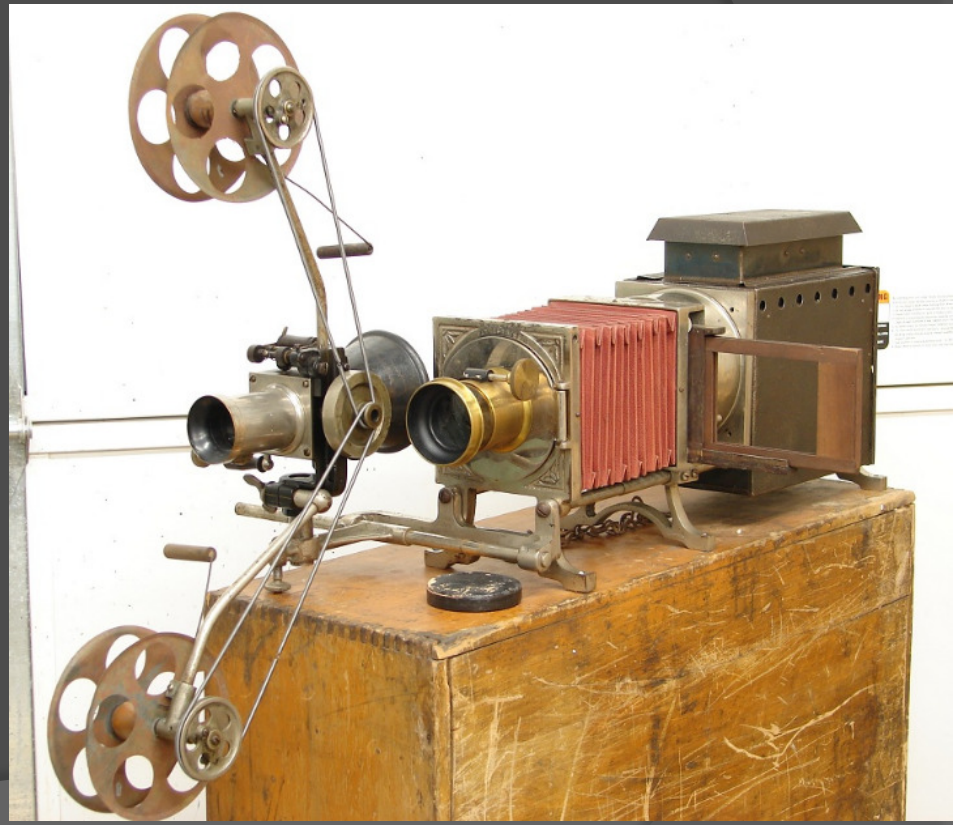
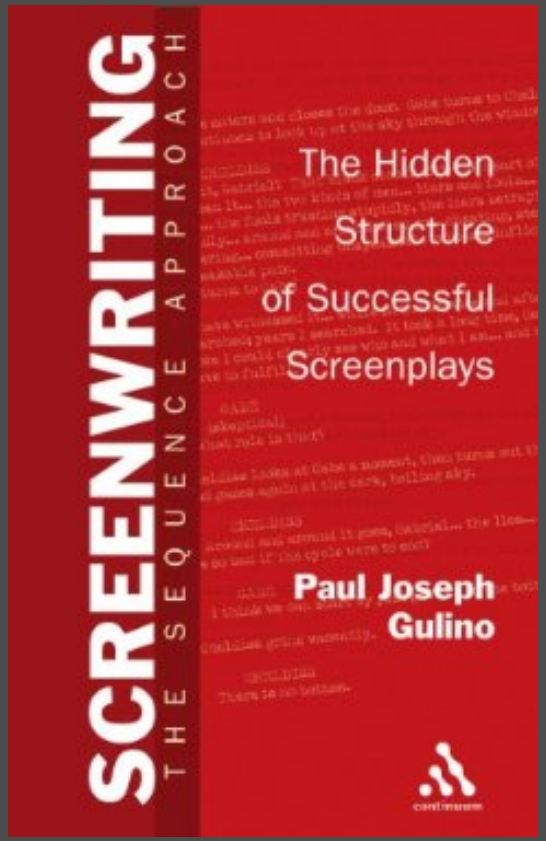


The “Act 2” Problem

- Padding
  - “Zzzzz”
    - Objective Driven
    - Causal
    - Fractal



Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach Paul Joseph Gulino

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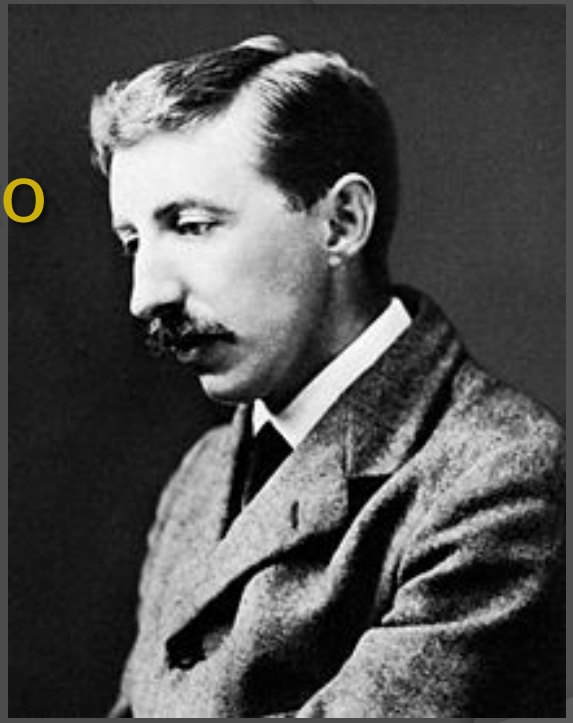

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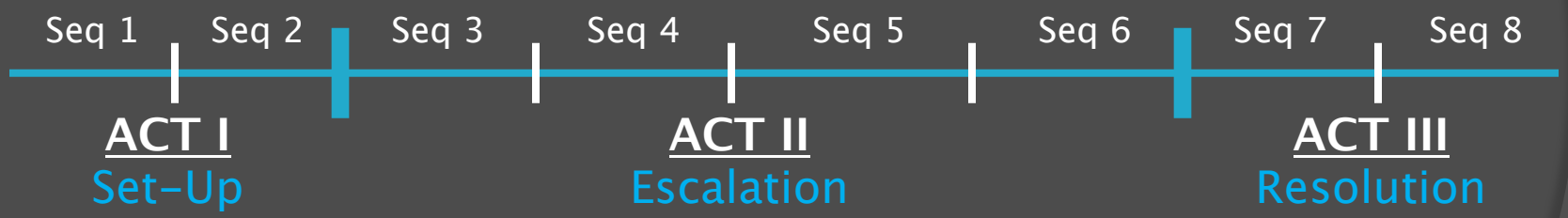
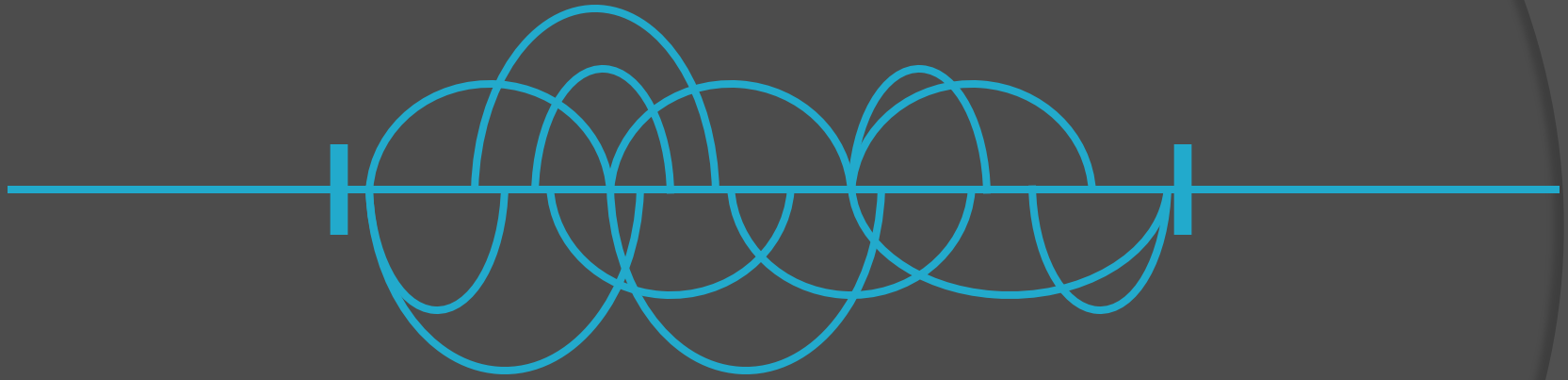
Sequence Structure



Non-Linear Sequence Structure

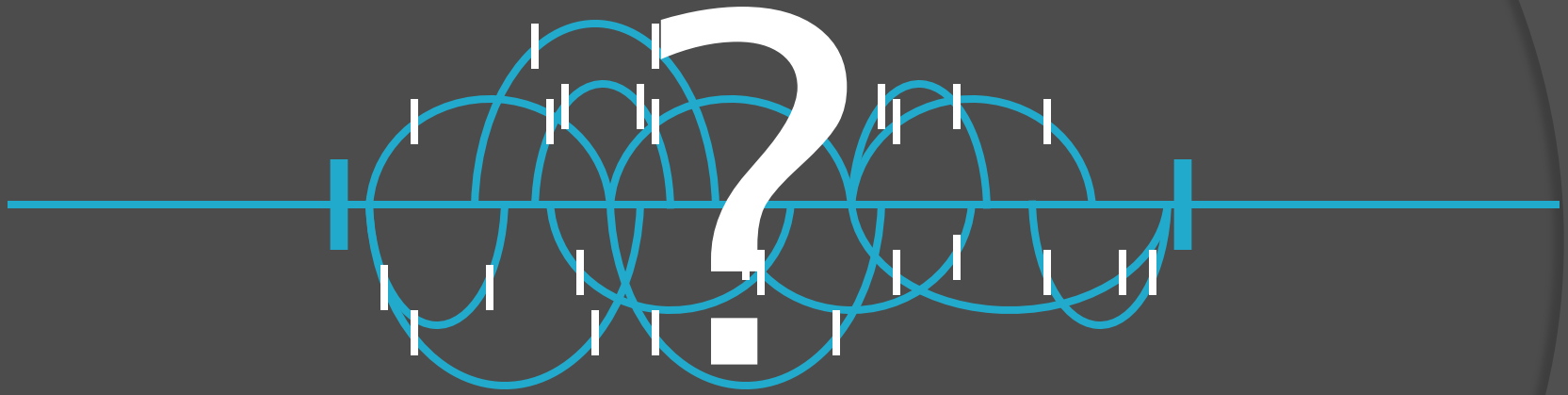


Part I
Set-Up

Part II
Escalation

Part III
Resolution

Non-Linear Sequence Structure



Part I
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Story: A Definition

Someonewho wants somethingbadly and is having a hard time getting it.

EMOTIONAL HOOK