

The Impact of Story Structures on the Enjoyment of Stories

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Problem Statement: Story structures, like the Hero’s Journey and three-act structures, are very abundant in today’s media, meaning that how they affect consumer enjoyment is important.

Abstract

This study is intended to investigate the effects of act-based story structures on the satisfaction of a reader with a story. Previous research has been mostly focused on the usage of story structures in films, and how experimentation with structure can produce much stronger stories, but also much worse. Prior research also suggests that music and plays do not use story structures to such an extent, but that the film industry is fully dependent on them. However, there are significant gaps in knowledge as to how this structure is perceived by the audience consuming the medium, or the usage of the structure in novels. To fill these gaps, a mixed qualitative/quantitative descriptive method was used to analyze the responses of readers to a survey. This survey asked readers to rate their satisfaction with stories written to epitomize either one of two common story structures, or no story structure at all. These responses will be analyzed to determine the impact of story structures on these responses. The results of this study will show whether these story structures have an effect on how readers rated the stories or not.

Background

Syd Field’s 1979 handbook *Screenplay* (Neilan, 2022) and Joseph Campbell’s 1949 book *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (Arnavas & Bellini, 2023; Moran, 2021) brought the three-act structure and Hero’s Journey/Monoplot structures, respectively, to the public view. These are mostly used for film (Moran, 2021; Neilan, 2022), though music and plays (“How to write a truly awful film (and make a million dollars in the process)”, 1997), videogames (Moran, 2021), and novels. The three-act structure uses a beginning, exposition, inciting incident, second thoughts, middle, rising action, midpoint twist, disaster, crisis, end, climax, obstacles, and resolution (Callaghan, 2023; Williamson, 2012). The Hero’s Journey consists of Act I (The Ordinary World, the Call to Adventure, the Refusal of the Call, Meeting the Mentor, and Crossing the Threshold), Act II (Tests, Allies, Enemies, Approach to the Inmost Cave, The Ordeal, and Reward), and Act III (The Road Back, Resurrection, and Return with the Elixir) (Cabal, 2023). While both are act-based structures that consist of three acts, the two do have minor differences.

Prior research has determined that the Hero’s Journey structure has become overused, and that differing approaches can be risky but successful (Neilan, 2022). Other structures exist, such as the Kishōtenketsu four-act structure, that can be applied successfully as well (Arnavas & Bellini, 2023). However, due to corporatization, three-act structures have become ubiquitous with the film industry (“How to write a truly awful film (and make a million dollars in the process)”, 1997; (Neilan, 2022).

Current research has not studied the impacts of these structures on written stories such as novels or short stories, nor how the use of these structures affects readers. The former question, if answered by the survey, could benefit authors by either providing a recommendation of the usage of a specific structure or warning against usage of the structures when targeting the surveyed audience. The latter question, if answered, could benefit those in industries that commonly use these structures, such as the film industry, as they would show whether these structures be effective with the target audience.

Method and Process Steps

This study aims to measure the effects of the use of act-based story structures on the satisfaction of readers with short stories that demonstrate said structures to varying degrees.

To collect this information, a mixed qualitative and quantitative descriptive method was used. With this method, the effect of act-centered stories was measured through a survey. To distribute this survey to teachers, posts were made in various Innovation Academy club Teams, as well as in Canvas announcements by some teachers. Although the survey and the project were initially targeted at Innovation Academy students exclusively, the survey was shared with outside individuals via text message after not receiving enough responses initially. This brought to a more general focus to the project.

This survey presents readers with six short stories. Each story was written to specifically reflect one of the select categories of structure. Two stories were based on the three-act structure, two on the Hero’s Journey structure, and two on avoiding structure entirely.

After each anonymous reader read each story, they were presented with a few questions. They were asked first to rate their level of satisfaction with the story in a quantitative measure of 1-10. Then, they were asked to briefly explain qualitatively why they rated it in the way they did. This was followed by them being asked to rate from 1-10 the role the structure of the story played in their satisfaction assessment and give a brief qualitative description of why they rated it in that way. At the end, each reader was asked which story was their favorite and which was their least favorite, and why they chose the stories as such.

These responses were exported into Microsoft Excel after the surveys were closed on Monday, April 14th. For each reader, the quantitative responses were analyzed. From there, the data was accumulated and graphed. This, combined with qualitative reader response data, was used to determine whether story structures have an impact on reader satisfaction.

Criteria for Success

The ratings the readers gave were used to determine the impact that structure in stories has on the perception of these stories. If rating differed significantly based only on structure, there could be said to be a significant impact, whereas if there was no correlation, there could be said to be no impact. If enough data was collected to show an impact or the lack thereof, it can be considered a success.

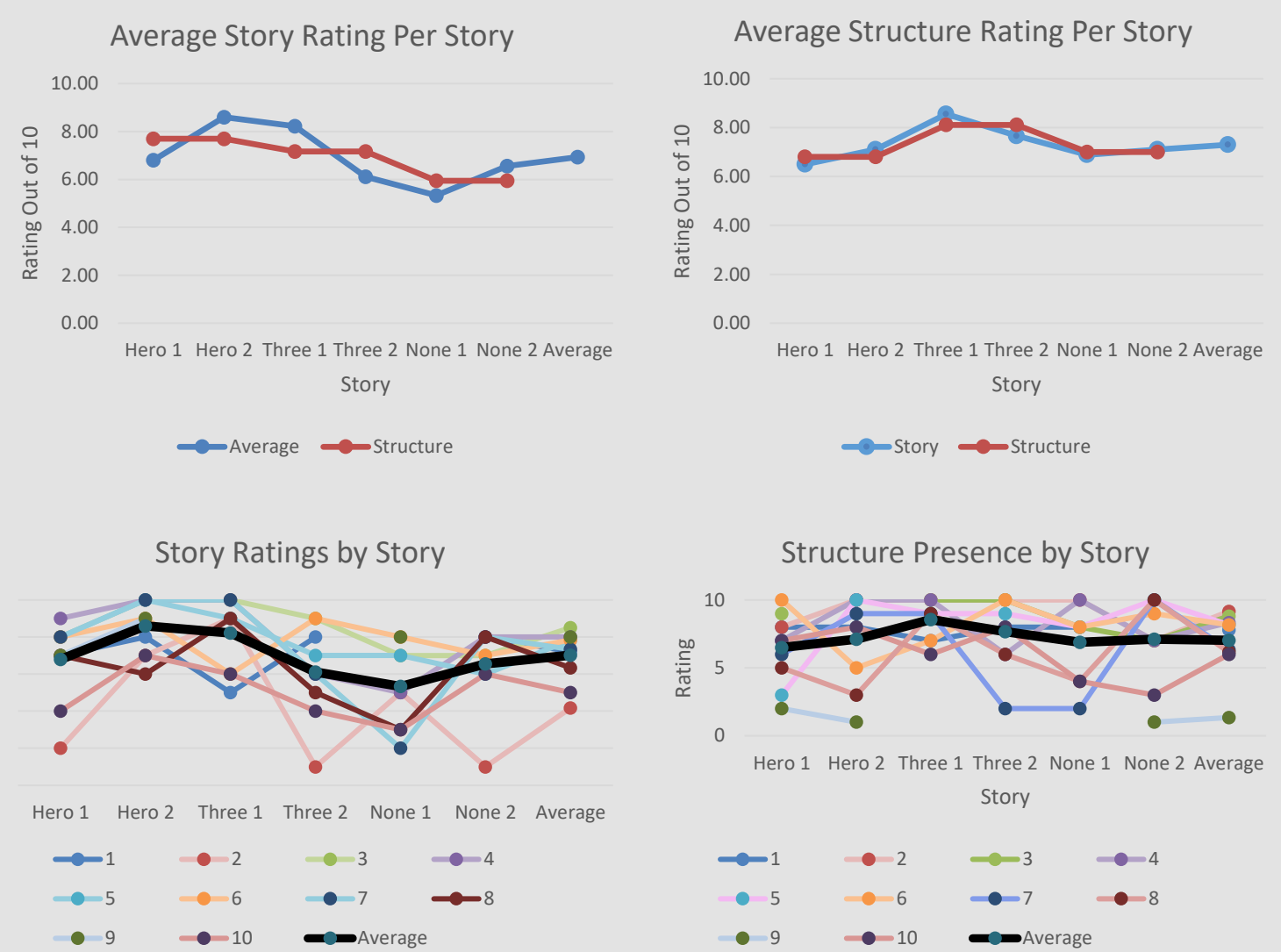
Results

I received 10 responses to my survey. Ratings of both structures and stories averaged around the 6-8 mark. For structures, the structure presence of Hero’s Journey structures was rated lower than the average and sported little consistency. While non-structured stories featured similar inconsistencies, they had higher structure presence ratings. While one three-act story was ... *(continued on next page)*

Research Question: How does the use of story structures such as the Hero’s Journey and three-act structure affect reader satisfaction with differently structured short stories?

Results (Continued)

...rated consistently, the other was not; still, both had their structure presence rated higher than any other story. Story ratings differed more between structures. For each structure, one story falls below and the other above the average for that structure, but Hero’s Journey stories were rated higher on average than the three-act stories, which were themselves rated higher than the non-structured stories. The average rating of the non-structured stories was lower than the average, joined in that only by the second three-act story.



Story Rating By Story								
Person	Hero 1	Hero 2	Three 1	Three 2	None 1	None 2	Average	
1	7	8	5	8		8	7.20	
2	2	7	9	1	5	1	4.17	
3	8	10	10	9	7	7	8.50	
4	9	10	10	6	5	8	8.00	
5	8	10	9	7	7	6	7.83	
6	8	9	6	9	8	7	7.83	
7	8	10	10	6	2	8	7.33	
8	7	6	9	5	3	8	6.33	
9	7	9				8	8.00	
10	4	7	6	4	3	6	5.00	
Average	6.80	8.60	8.22	6.11	5.33	6.56	7.31	

Qualitative responses disagreed on occasion. While some believed that Hero-1 was better for its structure, others thought the structure odd. Some enjoyed Three-1 better for its structure, or believed that “...[other] factors were more important” in their rating for Three-2. One reader liked the structure of Fallen, which had none. Other factors played a role; one reader consistently rated stories lower because of their “sad endings”, and many thought None-2 confusing. Some readers recognized the structures, albeit sometimes incorrectly.

Conclusion

This project analyzed how story structures impacted readers’ enjoyment of stories. Based on survey responses, the structure of a story appears to have a small yet existing impact. On average, stories written with the Hero’s Journey structure were rated higher than those written with the Three-Act structure, which were rated higher than those without structure. In reader responses, *(continued on next page)*

Conclusion (Continued)

...while some dismissed the structures as unimportant, others thought the structures crucial to their ratings. With this, it can be stated that Hero’s Journey structures have the potential to produce higher reader rankings than three-act structures, and three-act structures in turn have the potential to produce higher reader rankings than structure-defying stories. On the other hand, average ratings differed little based on structure, so the impact of structure is likely minimal and, while it may be more advantageous for an author to choose the Hero’s Journey structure, what they choose is ultimately second to how they write it.

Next Steps

Despite the in-depth responses received, a small sample size prevents definite assertion of the accuracy of the conclusion. In addition, it is possible that higher ratings may result from better stories rather than better structures, necessarily, and may be limited as well by reader preference. Future surveys may find it advantageous to survey a larger sample size and take more time to write the stories rather than rushing.

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