Good Morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle, and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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Happy Thanksgiving all! I hope it's full of good food, good times with family and friends, and good memories. I know the holidays can be a hard time for those dealing with loss and trauma. Let these days of remembrance and celebration bring healing and joy in place of hurt, surrounded by those who love and support you unconditionally.

Alright – sappy holiday greeting out of the way. Let's get down to business to defeat the Huns… Or rather, to defeat the plot question. It's taken me a while to figure out how to write this episode, and even longer to record it. Plot has always been an elusive concept for me and trying to extricate it from story and character in a meaningful way has been even trickier than I expected. Even so, this episode will hopefully allow us to **separate the elements of the story Triangulum and examine them in isolation before bringing them back together**.

So, let's roll up our sleeves and get elbow deep in the mechanics of plot.

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I'm going to begin by widening the separation I've always found the most difficult to make: the difference between plot and story. Even as I type this script up, the Synonym function in MS Word lists "story" as equivocal to "plot." Interestingly, it also lists "plan," "design," and "strategy" as well. This makes a lot of sense. In the writing community, authors often self-identify as either "plotters" or "pantsers…" meaning they either write to an outline, or write by the seat of their pants, making it up based on feeling and intuition. I want to focus on the first category: plotter. That is, those who plot – who plan. **Plot is the plan for constructing a narrative, a blueprint or framework for how the story and characters will be presented in order to maximize their effect.**

The story is the full sweep of events from A to B to C, all the way to Zed, in that order. It's the way events "really" happened in the story world (though the story world is by definition unreal). It's the same way that we experience events in our own lives… which

I don't need to tell you is often confusing, muddled, and irritating. We enjoy narratives because they are clearer than real life, or hold an inherent promise that any confusion or dislocation we feel will be cleared up by the end. Even if the point of it all was only to show that life is confusing and meaningless, it still comes to a point – it still has a thesis that evokes an emotional or intellectual response. **The plot makes an argument for one point of view – the author's.**

That's where the idea of plot and story can be separated most clearly. Consider the difference between news coverage of a person's life and a biography written after their death. Let's say that the author is positively inclined towards this person, and so dives into the hundreds or thousands of articles, opinion pieces, and personal writings surrounding them to find ones that will paint them in a heroic light. They'll select, rearrange, and edit down that mass of material until they have an outline of the plot they want to create: a relatively clear, comprehensible portrait of a person whose life was infinitely more complicated and confusing while they were alive.

For the characters in your story, the same could be said. As they experience the story events, it all seems confusing, random, and dissonant. They'd struggle to make sense of their own lives in the same way we struggle to make sense of our own. Think about it: even if you're lucky enough to know exactly what you want to do with your life and the direction you want to take, that meaning is just as constructed as any narrative plot, and in the trenches of reality, your meaning is constantly being contradicted. But as an author, you have the ability – and the responsibility – to make your meaning clear. In the same way a film edits out the unimportant or boring moments of everyday minutia, writers select what moments to focus on, in what order, to make their meaning clear.

There's a pair of terms in Russian Formalism that I find very helpful… and just fun to say. *Fabula* is the story as experienced by the characters, moment by moment: real events experienced without alteration. *Syuzhet* is the presentation of story as plot, or, as Viktor Shklovsky describes it, the story defamiliarized. By reordering and selectively presenting events to produce an effect

that is unfamiliar to ordinary life, the regular flow of experience is interrupted and challenged in a way that delights the reader.

For example, let's look at a simple story composed of a series of plot points, presented in chronological order. Point A: A parent reads "Twas the night before Christmas" to their child before they go to bed. Point B: The kid is unable to sleep, and sneaks down to see if Santa's really there. They find their parents instead. Point C: The kid stays awake all night, wondering why their parents lied to them. Point D: The kid decides not to tell his parents he saw them. Point E: The kid rushes down the next morning, pretending to be excited that Santa came.

Already, this story has marks of a plot, if not a terribly strong one: there's a beginning, middle, and end, all linked by cause and effect. However, if it was presented as is, there would be pretty much no surprises, and the lion's share of the narrative real estate (page count, runtime, ect.) would be taken up by the kid lying awake for 6 to 8 hours, wondering what to do. Even with an internal monologue, that debate would be a rather boring to read unless it was exceptionally well written.

So let's instead construct a Syuzhet and make this very familiar story a bit more engaging and effective. Start with Point C: The kid lying awake on Christmas Eve, wondering why their parents lied to them. Cut back to Point B, as the kid sneaks downstairs. As the feelings of confusion and betrayal stream in, cut forward to Point E: the kid rushing downstairs yelling "Santa came!" and their parents smiling happily. Cut back to Point A: The parent reading to the kid before bed. Their words take on meaning they wouldn't otherwise have had, and by carefully crafting the exchange of dialogue, you can show what led the kid to their decision: their parents desperately want them to believe in something more than the plain facts of real life.

It may not be a very complex plot, or even a very good one, but with a story this simple and well-worn, a unique plot structure defamiliarizes the experience and gives us new perspective. In addition, by cutting point D entirely and limiting points B and C to the climactic, decision making moments (or "turns"), the plot is much more streamlined and efficient. While retaining audience attention is one of the more mercenary concerns of plot construction, it is still an important one. I know we've all sat

through and read (or tried to read) classic films and books because of their reputation. They often feel sluggish and slow to our modern eyes. Hard as it is to admit, even the most ardent readers and avid cinephiles have attention spans shaped by the digital age, no matter how much we work to fight it. We are all the product of our time – not solely or entirely, but yet we cannot completely resist the influence of the culture we were raised in: a culture of instant gratification and "thanks u, next."

These days, if you're worried a chapter might bore your reader, you're probably right. That's not to say you need to write mile-a-minute-blockbusters, but your plots do need to be tight as a drum and use every moment as effectively as possible. Even slow-burn stories these days are constantly working to engage their audience through character and plot revelations, reversals, and effective tension. This work – this selection of detail to maintain audience engagement – is one of the **four fundamental forces of plot.** Strap on your goggles, listeners: it's time for some story science.

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In my not-so-expert opinion, the problem with many weak plots is that they view their narrative as a one-dimensional line. The stakes start at one set level, whether that's high or low, and then remain at that level while the story advances at a uniform pace. This often leads to narratives that may have an interesting beginning and end, but will still be bashed by reviewers for having "second-act problems…" A fancy way of saying the middle of the story was boring. The reader felt nothing, experienced little, and enjoyed less.

Some writers see this and try to add complexity to their plots to keep the reader engaged. Subplots and ancillary storylines pile on to create what they hope will be a complex tapestry of storytelling. This sometimes works, but most of the time, the law of diminishing returns kicks in once they reach a certain number. Get too complicated, and the audience will not be able to follow and emotionally invest in each plotline in a meaningful way.

There's another delineation to make here between "complex" and "complicated." Complicated plots have too many disparate, disconnected elements for your target audience to effectively

follow them. Complex plots, on the other hand, involve multiple *interconnected* storylines that add wrinkles and interest to the central plot. They are compelling rather than confusing, and for one simple reason: they add to the Narrative Momentum of the plot rather than the Narrative Drag.

These are the first two of our fundamental forces. They act along the forward axis of the plotline as it moves from beginning to end, one contributing to that motion, and the other subtracting from it. **Narrative Momentum is the feeling that the plot is moving forwards towards its end.** As soon as the goal or goals of the story are established, Narrative Momentum is generated by actions, revelations, and turns that move the plot towards those goals or increase the reader's interest in seeing those goals fulfilled by adding new layers of complexity.

Narrative Drag is the antithesis of this force: the feeling that the story is slowing down or stalling in its progression. Like drag on an airplane, it is either created artificially (through the use of flaps or control surfaces) or as the result of natural resistance from the environment – in this case, the tenancy of story to want to settle and stop. There's a tenancy for narratives to grind to a halt if the stakes remain at the same level for too long. Without sufficient forward momentum and drive towards the endpoint or an escalation of narrative stakes, the plot begins to slow as events become circular – the protagonist and antagonist dancing around their wants and needs in the same way they always have. Incidents happen, but there is no feeling that the story is going anywhere.

These concepts may seem a little subjective, rather than concrete and definitive. That's because they are. Storytelling is subjective: the telling of a subjective experience that will be perceived subjectively by individual readers. If there was a definitive formula to make plot work, I believe we'd stop telling and reading stories because all the fun that comes from uncertainty, exploration, and discovery would be gone.

Now, with those two forces moving the plot forward and pushing against its progress, what's left? I'm sure most of you have already guessed it, since I've mentioned "escalation" several times in this episode alone. In the construction of plot, **Conflict is what increases the stakes of your story, engages reader**

attention, and builds the sense of energy. Conflict takes many forms, both internal and external, and I'm sure most of you have already had the various types drilled into your heads by your English teachers. The important thing to remember is that the types of conflict you will be able to include in your plot are naturally determined by the type of story you're telling, and that you shouldn't try to add more sources of conflict than the narrative will support.

As in the difference between complicated and complex plots, a large number of conflicts in the same type will muddle the effectiveness of each. On the other hand, a variety of different conflict types originating from interconnected sources will increase narrative focus. For instance, a protagonist fighting off several assassins who all want to kill them for a monetary reward does not make for a very compelling story, unless the conflicts they have with each of the assassins is compellingly different. If instead, the protagonist is pitted against one antagonist whose motives correlate with some internal conflict they are struggling with, the two forms of conflict (internal and external) add to one another, rather than subtracting focus. Additionally, having conflicts that feed into one another organically gives you plenty of ways to escalate the stakes. An action by the antagonist could exacerbate an old psychological wound of the protagonist and increase their self-doubt and internal conflict, making the external conflict more difficult, and so on.

Acting in opposition to Conflict is Resolution. **Resolution is the tenancy of parties in conflict to want to end conflict and return to a state of balance.** This is why so many conflicts seem trite or unrealistic to readers. I've often heard people watching a movie or a TV show ask "why don't they just talk about it?" or say that "this is so unnecessary." Human beings, when they don't have an overpowering need for something another person has, want to work together. They want to be helped, if not always to help others. Conflict makes this impossible and pits them against the very individuals who could help them achieve their goal. And when it comes to internal conflict, no one wants to experience it for very long. If we were free from our traumas and had unlimited time, most people would at least try to come to terms with their own emotional and personal issues.

This is the force of gravity in your plot, pulling the stakes lower if some new force of opposition or increase in conflict doesn't arrest their fall. It also shows why need and want are so critical to building tension in Character Driven stories. If the force of opposition is another person, then both the antagonist and the protagonist must have wants so powerful that they overcome their natural desire to resolve the conflict. **The source of conflict, whether a human villain, a hostile environment, or a psychological flaw, must be relentless enough to avoid the downward draw of resolution, yet not be utterly or unrealistically unstoppable.**

With all that said, you might think the solution for developing an effective plot is simple: remove all sources of narrative drag and resolution from your story. Trust me, you wouldn't be the first to think that – see the long string of muscle-bound, unstoppable 80's type action heroes with no discernable flaws or weaknesses who mowed down entire armies on their way to revenge. The problems with that type of plot should be very clear: by removing the balancing and resisting forces from story, the plot shoots straight out of the realm of believability and into caricature and self-parody, whether intentionally or not. Instead, these forces must be brought into balance based on the needs of the story, the personalities and needs of the characters, and the available narrative real estate. For a short story with a limited number of plot points, a slow-burn approach will not get you from beginning to end in time. For a 300 page epic that spans years and lives, too little resistance will mean your plot will naturally resolve itself too soon and leave you with a 50 page epilogue with no stakes, or else require you to fuse the narrative with a new source of conflict hallway through.

Sorry to say it, but broken record Trevor here: Listen to your story. Listen to what it's trying to say. Listen for the kind of effect it's trying to have on a reader. Write out your plot points in whatever way works for you (in a notebook, on 3x5 cards, on a whiteboard, etc.) and examine the emotional impact of each. Determine which force they add energy to: Momentum, Drag, Conflict, or Resolution. How much does it add to each force? Is the plot naturally moving too fast? Then add a bit of drag… not so much that it kills momentum, but enough to realistically slow the pace down. More likely it will be moving too slowly (especially in

the second act), and you'll need to add more energy, either by organically generating momentum or conflict. And finally, make sure that by the end, the plot can come to a satisfying landing, with all conflicts meaningfully resolved and the narrative momentum slowed to a level that the reader doesn't feel like there should be more… unless that's the effect you're going for. That's certainly what I did at the end of *The Stars Eternal*, though that was more to give a sense of hope for these characters' future than to imply a sequel.

Remember: plot is about balance, not speed. Keeping the four fundamental forces in balance is often a matter of intuition, but it's also part of planning and thinking through your story before you begin. Even if you are a self-proclaimed pantser, let me assure you that a little plotting goes a long way.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's elbow-grease plot breakdown was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, with music from the exceptional Ms. Lauren Baker.

If you enjoyed this show, please share it out, and be sure to check out homesteadonthecorner.com for extra content, outtakes, and more info about the show. And if you really like it, please consider becoming a monthly supporter on Patreon.

Next episode, it's our first Christmas special – a post-apocalyptic adventure about finding hope in the darkest, coldest times. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it, and please rate and review us on Apple Podcast! It really does help get this show out to more people.

Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.