

dial-a-plot

..the backstory



Vladimir Propp was a Soviet scholar and folklorist. Propp showed that all folktales consist of an ordered system of thirty-one narrative units which he referred to as “plot functions”. In dial-a-plot, Propp’s “functions” have been adapted for use in design and embodied in a game-like activity intended to stimulate creative thinking and group discussion of stories.

Section from a fictional depiction of how Vladimir Propp completed his work on “The Morphology of the Folktale” (1928), told illustrating the thirty-one plot functions (full storyboard at: storienteer.info).



XVI. The hero and the villain join in direct combat.

XVII. The hero is branded.

XVIII. The villain is defeated.



XIX. The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated.

XX. The hero returns.

XXI. The hero is persuaded.

In order to adapt Propp’s work for use in design storytelling, much of the terminology used by Propp to describe actors and situations has been changed. Archetypal characters such as ‘hero’ and ‘villain’ have been replaced by the generic term ‘agent’. Functions containing terms such as ‘interdiction’, ‘trickery’, and ‘magical agent’ have been rephrased. Using the process of pairing and trial-and-error studies, the thirty-one plot functions have been reduced to eighteen, and these further divided to reflect the “three-act structure”.

Functions follow a strict sequence in each “tale”. Similar common structures seem to exist in design scenarios, which might be viewed as the shared myths of the design community.