



Digital Filmmaking Handbook

Script Structure Analysis

As you've seen in Chapter 2 of the Digital Filmmaking Handbook, good structure is one of the most important parts of making a good movie, be it a short, documentary, or feature length film.

In Chapter 2, you read about the three-act structure that most Hollywood films follow and you saw a brief explanation of how the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is structured. On closer inspection, though, Hollywood film structure is much more complicated than the simple beginning/middle/end points discussed in Chapter 2. In this essay, we'll be taking an in-depth look at the structure of a typical Hollywood movie and dissecting a number of movies.

Obviously, if you're simply shooting a video of your friends, you don't need to know about the specifics of feature-length movie structure. However, if you have any aspirations about one day making a longer movie, then you might as well go ahead and start to learn how they're built, as it can take some study to really understand.

Even if you don't have any interest in making movies, understanding movie structure can make watching movies much more interesting.

Finally, it's important to note that the structures you're reading about in this essay are codified, standard practices used by working screenwriters. Most Hollywood screenwriters spend a good deal of time actively learning the story structure you're going to read about here, and they carefully map out their scripts according to this structure.

As you saw in Chapter 2, when using standard screenplay format, one page typically equals one minute of screen time. So, if a screenwriter has studied his script structure and knows that Act 1 usually ends after half an hour, then he will try like crazy to hit the end of act 1 by page 30.

RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK

In addition to being an entirely enjoyable movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is an example of textbook, by-the-numbers screenplay structure. In this section we're going to look at what, exactly that structure is and why it works.

We're going to start with a brief summary of the most important scenes in the movie. If you haven't seen the movie in a while, this should help refresh your memory. Even if you're familiar with the movie, this section should help you to underscore the function of each of these scenes. (Obviously, if you've never seen the movie, you need to go watch it.)

On the left is the time that each scene occurs, listed in both Hours and Minutes and just total minutes.



Act I:

- 0:00 Raiders begins with a credit sequence that is superimposed over footage of some men walking through a jungle. Like most credit sequences, none of the action is too important, so as not to distract from the credits.
- 2:45 The credits end and we see the caption: “South America – 1936.” At 3 minutes, we see Indiana Jones’ face for the first time. This is, effectively his introduction. From what we’ve seen so far, we know that he’s the leader of these men. The rest of the scene is a fast-moving chase as Indy swipes a well-guarded idol, only to lose the idol to his arch-enemy, Belaq. We now have our hero and our villain.
- 12:40 Now we see the “other” Indiana Jones and learn a little more about him. He is a respectable, adored professor, possibly even a little absent-minded.
- 15:15 The first thing the officers do is describe Indy as “archaeologist, professor and...how does one say it? ‘Obtainer of rare antiquities.’” That pretty much fills in the rest of the details about him. In this scene, we learn what the Ark of the Covenant is, where it’s hidden, how to find it, what you need to get it (the “headpiece to the Staff of Ra”) and that Hitler is also racing to grab it.
- 20:00 Now we get a look at his private life, just to round out his character a little more, and we learn that he’s been given the job to “go for the Ark.” His friend Brody introduces the idea that the Ark might be dangerous. Indy laughs this off, setting a somewhat foreboding tone.
- 23:00 After watching Indy board a plane (followed by a suspicious-looking man) we now see a remote bar in snow-swept Nepal. Inside, a woman is having a drinking contest with a very large local man. After she wins the contest, Indy shows up to talk to her and ask her for the headpiece to the Staff of Ra. This scene provides some valuable background. In it, we learn that Indy and Marion were once romantically involved, and we learn that Marion has an amazing ability to drink people under the table (though we don’t know yet that this is important).



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30:00 Marion tells Indy to “come back tomorrow” for the headpiece and so he leaves. Shortly thereafter, the suspicious-looking man from the plane arrives with some henchman. They, too, want the headpiece. Indy returns in time to save the day and a tense fight ensues. By the end of the scene, Indy and Marion have beaten the bad guys, the suspicious-looking man has burned his hand on the amulet, and Marion’s bar has been burned down. As she and Indy stand outside in the snow, she shows him the amulet and tells him that, from then on, she’s his partner.

That’s the end of Act I. We’ve got all of our main characters and we’ve identified our problem. Once you’re used to thinking in three-act structure, you’ll start to be able to “feel” the act breaks as they happen. Act I usually ends with an action scene (in this case, the fight in Marion’s bar) and with something of great portent (in this case, Marion’s claim that Indy is now stuck with her). At the end of Act I, the audience usually feels like all the pieces are in place, and that now the movie can really start.

Act II:

34:00 The second Act begins in Cairo when we are introduced to Indy’s friend Sala. He, too is an important character, but he is only an Act II character, as you will see. Act II is mostly about complications – putting obstacles in the Hero’s way and letting him solve them. So, this act is mostly chase scenes. Because Act I usually ends with a bang, Act II usually starts with a bit of a lull, so this scene shows Indy at his friend Sala’s house. Some important information is conveyed about the Nazi’s progress, and Sala says he may know someone who can read the headpiece.

35:30 Marion and Indy happily walk through an Egyptian market buying food. Along the way, they fill in a few more details about their past. At the same time, we see a lot of henchmen and bad guys surrounding them, plotting, and getting closer. We also establish Indiana Jones’ taste for dates.

38:00 The bad guys finally attack and a long fight ensues. In the process, Marion appears to be blown up in a truck.



- 42:00 Indy sits in a bar, trying to drink away his sorrow over Marion's death. Belaq appears and the two men taunt each other a bit as Belaq tells him about what he will do when he finds the Ark. As Belaq's men are about to kill Indy, Sala's children rush in to save him.
- 46:32 It is night time, and Indy and Sala are in the house of a very old Egyptian. He appears to be some kind of astrologer/mystic. At the beginning of this scene, we see a villain poison a bowl full of dates that are then set out for the men to enjoy. As the scene progresses, we learn that the Nazi's fake staff of Ra is the wrong size, and that the Nazi's are digging in the wrong place. Indy now knows that he can beat them to the Ark. Just as he is about to eat a date, the poison is discovered and his life is spared. (We'll talk more about this scene later.)
- 49:20 Now we're at the dig site for the first time. We see the scale of the Nazi's operation and we establish what the ruin looks like.
- 51:00 Indy enters the map room, performs his calculations, and discovers where the Ark is. (I always thought this scene was funny because, after all the trouble of getting the Staff of Ra, and putting it in the right hole, and waiting for the Sun to hit at just the right time, it turns out that the map room is the little square building in the dead center of town, surrounded by an impressive row of columns. In other words, it's the one place where you'd think it was if you simply looked at the map.)
- 54:00 Indy discovers Marion and realizes he can't free her yet.
- 56:00 Indy discovers where the Ark is.
- 56:50 The SS guy (the suspicious-looking guy from the airplane in Act I) returns, and we learn where the Nazi's got their headpiece.
- 57:20 Indy brings his men to the site, they begin to dig. They open the well and realize it's full of snakes.



- 1:00 Belaq tries to befriend Marion. She asks him for something to drink, and now we realize that this is her plan to escape. As we already know, she can drink anyone under the table.
- 1:02:50 Indy is lowered into the building where the Ark is.
- 1:04:20 Marion and Belaq start drinking.
- 1:05:05 Indy and Sala open the vault where the Ark is.
- 1:06:15 More drinking. The SS guy arrives.
- 1:08:13 They raise the Ark out through the roof.
- 1:09:30 Belaq discovers Indy's digging.
- 1:10:15 Belaq gets the Ark and confronts Indy. The Nazi's through Marion into the Well of Souls. Now, these two story-lines that we've been cutting between are merged back together as Indy and Marion are reunited and thrown into danger together.
- 1:12:20 Indy and Marion manage to escape. (The tension in this scene is nicely underscored by Marion watching her torch slowly go out.)
- 1:15:30 Having just escaped from the Well of Souls, they discover that the Nazi's are about to load the Ark onto an airplane. Indy tries to seize control of the plane and a big fight ensues.
- 1:20:40 After a five-minute fight scene, the plane is detonated. Belaq and the Nazis see this happen and take over. Indy's plan to be on the plane with the Ark has been foiled. He's lost the Ark and now they know he's still alive.
- 1:21 Sala discovers Indy and Marion and breaks the news to them that the Ark is being loaded onto a truck that is bound for Cairo. Indy realizes he has a second chance! With great determination he menacingly asks Sala "What truck?!" This is the mid-point of the movie, the point where the hero's fortunes turn around. Indy'd lost the Ark twice



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already, the Nazi's were sure to be on to him...all seemed lost. Now, he's got another chance and the resolve to make it work!

- 1:21:22 The Nazi convoy heads out of camp, carrying the Ark.
- 1:22:11 Indy rides out of camp on a white horse, as the locals watch and cheer.
- 1:23:10 Indy engages the convoy and a massive chase scene ensues. Note that, once Indy has control of the truck and gains the upper hand, he begins to smile. He's having fun now, another sign that we're past the midpoint and that his fortunes are changing. Of course, he hasn't won yet.
- 1:29:43 The chase scene has just ended and a very beat-up Indy arrives with Marion and Sala at a seaport. It is night, and Sala introduces Indy to the ship captain that will take them – with the Ark – to England. Sala now leaves the movie. Remember, he's an Act II character and so is written out before the end of the act. Everyone else (even the creepy Nazi SS guy) is still around, because they were introduced in Act I.
- 1:31:37 Indy and Marion clean-up and make up.
- 1:34:00 In its crate in the ship's hold, the Ark mysteriously burns the swastika off of the crate. So far, we haven't know if the Ark really has any mysterious power. Now we learn that it does.
- 1:34:18 It is morning and Indy has heard the engines stop. He goes to investigate.
- 1:35:34 The Nazi's have boarded the ship, nabbed Marion, and taken the Ark, but Jones is nowhere to be found. They are furious, but they leave.
- 1:37:06 Even the crew of the ship can't find Jones. The first mate is told to look again.



1:37:20 They've found him. He has swam through the open sea to the German sub and is climbing about. As the crew sees him, they cheer and salute. He salutes back and we arrive at the end of Act II. Everything's in place for our final push to a resolution of the movie. The Act II characters – including the ship captain and crew – have been put back where they belong, our heroes and villains (and their prize) are all headed down the same path (in this case, carried by a submarine) to a final conclusion. No new information or characters will be revealed from here on out.

Act III:

1:38:20 The Nazi sub arrives in a hanger in a remote island in the South Pacific. Indiana Jones, who has stowed away, mugs a German guard for his uniform.

1:40:00 The Nazis begin a procession to carry the Ark to an altar where it will be opened.

1:41:52 Indy appears with a bazooka and threatens to blow up the Ark if they don't give him Marion. They refuse, but of course he doesn't blow up the Ark. And let's face it, we don't want him to because we want to see it opened.

1:44:00 At the altar, the Ark-opening ritual begins

1:44:40 The Ark is opened

1:47:00 Everything goes bad. Indy tells Marion to keep her eyes shut. All the Germans are killed by the Ark and swept into the sky.

1:48:30 The Ark sits peacefully and Marion and Indy discover they're okay.

1:48:52 Indy's back in D.C. He and Brody meet with the Army Intelligence officer.

1:50:17 The Ark is crated up and wheeled into a warehouse.



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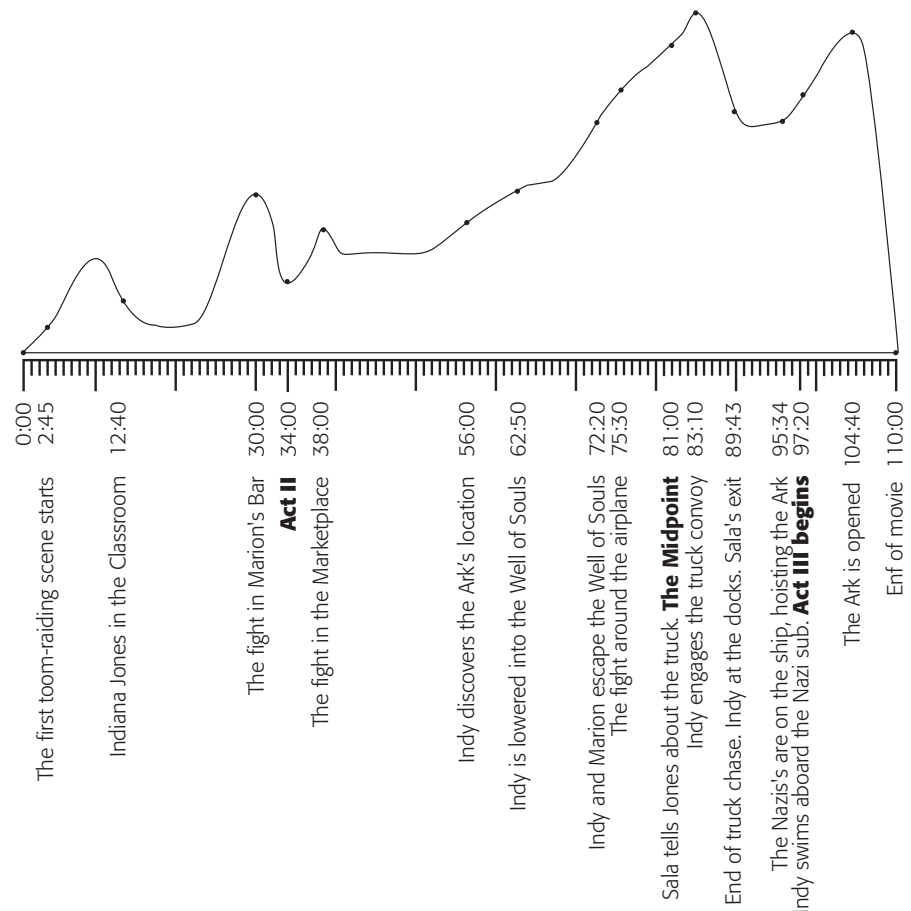
1:50:51

Obviously, the end of Act III.

This may seem like a lot of information, but don't worry, it's going to make a lot more sense in a minute. The first thing to realize is that the standard Hollywood structure doesn't have to follow these exact times. These times are simply listed to give you an idea of how long each section is, but more importantly, to help you locate these scenes yourself. Though professional screenwriters usually try to hold themselves to rough times – 30 minutes for Act I, 50 minutes for Act II, and so on – they don't maniacally worry that the midpoint happen at exactly 1 hour and 21 minutes into the movie. So don't freak out too much about these times.

WAVES OF TENSION

As discussed in Chapter 3, the main point of Hollywood movie structure is to create a movie that “moves.” That is, a movie that is compelling to watch and that keeps people's attention. So why, exactly, does this structure do that? Let's take a slightly different look at the information presented above.





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This chart on the previous page shows a graph of the “tension level” of some of the major scenes in the movie. As you can see, as the movie progresses, the tension level steadily builds.

What’s most important to notice, though, is that the level of tension falls very regularly. Think about tensing the muscles in your leg. You can only hold them tense for so long before you have to relax them. After relaxing them, you can tense them again – and maybe tense them a little more as you get warmed up.

Emotional tension works the same way. You can’t hope to keep your audience revved-up and tense through your whole movie. You have to regularly give them the opportunity to relax, so that you can get them tensed up again later. If you’ll notice in the graph, though, as the movie progresses, each succeeding “relaxed” moment has a higher tension level than the previous one. This is partly because, even in their relaxed moments, the characters are in more danger in the middle of the movie than they were at the beginning. But it’s also because we’ve come to really care about the characters, and so we’re more concerned that they succeed.

STRUCTURE WITHIN STRUCTURE

Though we’ve discussed a lot of maniacal detail about the structure of this movie, it still is – essentially – nothing more than a beginning/middle/end structure:

- Act I: Define the problem (Get the Ark)
- Act II: Complicate the problem (Mix in Nazis, snakes, henchmen, trucks, etc. until finally the solution to the problem is presented: Indy will have to deal with the Nazi’s in the submarine)
- Act III: Play out the solution (Fortunately, the Ark takes care of the Nazi’s for him, but Indy’s wisdom keeps he and Marion alive)

However, it’s interesting to note that if you take almost any individual scene in this movie, you’ll find that it also has a beginning/middle/end structure. In fact, in some cases, this structure is repeated down to individual shots.

Consider the scene where Indiana Jones and Sala visit the old man who translates the headpiece:

- The scene begins with a long shot of Indiana looking through the window of a door. He leaves to go into another room
- We see a woman put some dates in a bowl
- We see a man sneak in and pour a liquid on the dates (we assume it’s poison)



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That's then "beginning" section of this scene. We've established Indy's location and introduced a problem: the dates are poisoned.

In the middle section, the three men work out the details about the headpiece while Indy's adopted pet monkey prowls the room. At several points during the middle of the scene, Indy comes very close to eating the date.

At the end of the scene, they make their discovery that the Nazi's are digging in the wrong place and that they can, actually, beat them to the Ark. But what about the "date" problem? Indy throws a date in the air, and is ready to catch it in his mouth when Sala snatches it away at the last minute. The monkey's on the floor, dead from eating a date.

Beginning, middle, end repeats itself over and over throughout the movie.

The poison date problem adds a nice level of tension to a scene that would, otherwise, be pretty boring. In fact, almost every major scene in Act II has an extra tense subplot. Not only does this serve to keep the general tension level higher, it also makes the movie into a whole bunch of tiny episodes. This helps keep the audience's attention.

One final note about this scene: it introduces an interesting recurring theme. Every time Indy takes a step closer to the Ark, the weather gets bad. When the old man translates the measurements on the headpiece (which means that they now know the correct height of the staff) a sudden wind blows through his apartment. Later, as Indy and his men dig deeper into the sand, a storm starts brewing. In this way, the Ark's "personality" begins to show itself, and the tension of these scenes is increased.

OTHER MOVIES

Now it gets really interesting. We're going to take a quick look at some other movies. As we do, you'll be able to see just how much of a tried-and-true "formula" this structure really is.

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