



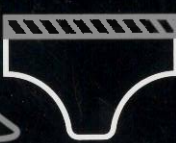
☐ EAT
☒ PAY
☐ LOVE



DESIGN IS



STORYTELLING



ELLEN LUPTON



- ☒ HERO'S JOURNEY
- ☒ THE GAZE
- ☒ NARRATIVE ARC



Design Is Storytelling

Ellen Lupton



**COOPER
HEWITT**

Bib. 6 00006461

Item. 1 00008783

Barcode. 000010009532

Call no. NK1520

L867

2019

Date 4 May 2023

Contents

4 Overture

FOREWORD

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INCITING INCIDENTS

14 Act 1 | Action

Narrative Arc

Hero's Journey

Storyboard

Rule of Threes

Scenario Planning

Design Fiction

56 Act 2 | Emotion

Experience Economy

Emotional Journey

Co-creation

Persona

Emoji

Color and Emotion

112 Act 3 | Sensation

The Gaze

Gestalt Principles

Affordance

Behavioral Economics

Multisensory Design

152 Aftermath

CLINIC | IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

CLASSROOM | PROJECT GENERATOR

TAKEAWAY | STORYTELLING CHECKLIST

INDEX

**[Curtain is closed.
Stage is dark.]**

Overture

Foreword

Caroline Baumann, Director
Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

Once upon a time, museums were staid palaces of culture. These formal and forbidding places sought to safeguard the treasures of civilization. Today's museums are more open and participatory. People come here to look, learn, make, and converse.

At Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, storytelling is part of everything we do. We tell stories about the lives of designers, the process of design, the power of technology, and the evolution of materials. We tell stories about how communities create change and how designers have built their own profession. Every exhibition, event, and web entry has a dynamic narrative arc.

Cooper Hewitt's visitors devise their own stories from the artifacts and ideas they find here. Every museum visit is a unique path through a sensory world. Those paths have peaks of intensity and points of rest. A professional designer or a college student will have a different museum experience—and a different story to tell—than a third-grader or an international tourist.

Cooper Hewitt publishes original works of scholarship across all media, from exhibition catalogues and monographs devoted to design minds to e-books and even coloring books. Each publication has a point of view about how and why design is practiced. This book, *Design Is Storytelling*, is a new contribution to the field of design education. Ellen Lupton, Cooper Hewitt's longtime curator of contemporary design, has gathered here a fascinating range of insights about the narrative impact of design. This fun and practical book will be useful to designers, educators, students, and clients alike—and to anyone interested in using design to inspire action and stir emotion. Enjoy!

Acknowledgments

Ellen Lupton, Senior Curator of Contemporary Design
Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

I first approached my colleagues at Cooper Hewitt with an idea for a book about design and storytelling in September, 2015. I am so delighted and thankful that the concept was enthusiastically supported by Caroline Baumann, Director, and Cara McCarty, Curatorial Director. It has been a privilege to work on this book with their support and expert guidance.

I never would have finished creating this book without the energy and drive of Pamela Horn, Cooper Hewitt's Director of Cross-Platform Publishing. She pushed me to keep moving when the task felt impossible, and she constantly brought me new sources and directions to explore. She supported the creative process in every way and made this book a personal priority. Matthew Kennedy is an editorial partner with exquisite judgment and wit; working with him is always fun and productive.

Over the past decade, the courses I have taught at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore have revolved around experience and communication. Design is no longer focused on static objects and images. Design is a time-based, interactive enterprise. I am grateful to all my students and colleagues at MICA for demonstrating the power of stories and inspiring me with their creative work. I owe special thanks to Marcus Civin, John Dornberger, Brockett Horne, Gwynne Keathley, Jennifer Cole Phillips, and my many graduate and undergraduate students.

It has been my privilege to be a student myself in the MA in Writing program at Johns Hopkins University. It is here that I came to study the theory and mechanics of narrative, and it is here that I began to explore the overlaps between design practice and storytelling. I am grateful for everything I have learned from the faculty at Hopkins, especially from William Black, Mark Farrington, Karen Houppert, and Jeannie Venasco.

Many artists, illustrators, and designers shared their work for this book. I thank each of them for their talent and generosity. However, no single artist contributed more than my dear friend and long-time collaborator Jennifer Tobias. This book is truly our joint effort, a labor of love that filled many weekends with sketching, talking, and musing. I'm also grateful to my friend and teaching colleague Jason Gottlieb for bringing so much care and creativity to the cover design.

Much thanks goes to my friends and family for their patience and interest. I am grateful to my parents (Mary Jane Lupton, Ken Baldwin, William Lupton, and Lauren Carter), my children (Jay Lupton Miller and Ruby Jane Miller), my sister (Julia Reinhard Lupton), my brilliant husband (Abbott Miller), my friends Edward and Claudia, and all the Miller sisters.



Illustration by Adrian Tomine

Inciting Incidents

I first heard the statement “Design is problem solving” when I was an art student at The Cooper Union in New York City. This was the early 1980s—long before the arrival of Photoshop, digital fonts, or the Internet. We were taught that in order to solve visual problems, designers should apply simple forms in a rational manner. The signage system used in New York City’s subway was—and is—a brilliant work of problem solving. To create it, Massimo Vignelli and Bob Noorda deployed sans serif type and bright dots of color to unify a network of deteriorating stations. The system, implemented in 1970 after years of research, is easy to understand and efficient to maintain. Problem solved, four decades and counting.

The MTA’s signage system tells you more, however, than where to find the A train. When the signs first appeared, those crisp white letters and sharp dots of color announced a new language of rational communication. The signs didn’t just solve a problem; they embodied ideas and principles. They celebrated the subway’s transition from a collection of competing subway lines to a government-owned public authority. They conveyed values about order, reliability, and civic life.

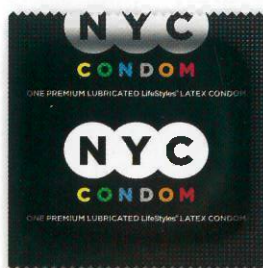
As a student, I felt that problem solving didn’t account for everything I wanted to know about design practice. Problem solving wasn’t enough. What about beauty, feeling, and sensation? What about humor, conflict, and interpretation? Ever since those student days, I’ve been asking these questions in my work as a writer and curator. Fascinated by critical theory, I have written about relationships between writing and typography. As a professor at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), I have explored experience design, multisensory design, and the psychology of perception. As a curator at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, I’ve looked at how

PROBLEM-SOLVING

Brooklyn Bridge City Hall Station

4 5 6 J Z

STORYTELLING



designers have approached feminism, the body, and the user. I marvel at Cooper Hewitt's inclusive collection, which includes everything from Vignelli's abstract map of the New York City subway system to a birdcage shaped like a neo-Gothic cottage. The museum was founded in 1895 as a resource for working artists and designers, including students attending The Cooper Union, the museum's original home. Today, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum addresses all levels of design education, from kindergarten to grad school.

A subway is more than a rational system. It is a place where people fall asleep, fall in love, get drunk, get lost, and sometimes take their lives. Trains rumble, platforms murmur, and ads hawk everything from underpants to wrinkle cream. In 2008, Yves Béhar designed a line of free condoms (distributed by the city's health department) inspired by New York's subway signs. Applied to condom packaging, the subway's colorful dots represent a city where people move about and freely mingle, a place of love and danger. Béhar practices human-centered design, a methodology that combines rational problem solving with emotional storytelling.

This book explores connections between storytelling and design. Stories depict action and stimulate curiosity. A story can be shorter than a limerick or as long as an epic poem. Design uses form, color, materials, language, and systems thinking to transform the meaning of everything from transit signs and web apps to shampoo bottles and emergency shelters. Design embodies values and illustrates ideas. It delights, surprises, and urges us to action. Whether creating an interactive product or a data-rich publication, designers invite people to enter a scene and explore what's there—to touch, wander, move, and perform.

Design Is Storytelling examines the psychology of visual communication from a narrative point of view. Human beings actively seek and create patterns as we navigate the world—and we feel intrigued, stimulated, and sometimes frustrated when patterns break. Storytelling can help products and communications hook the imagination of users and invite actions and behaviors.

A young woman approached me recently after a lecture in Beirut, Lebanon, eager to discuss creative practice. “What excites me about design,” she said, “is the potential to transfer information into someone else’s mind.” Stories do that, too. Stories travel from person to person and place to place. A well-made sentence moves ideas from the head of a writer to the head of a reader. That’s how Steven Pinker talks about writing in his wonderful guide *The Sense of Style*. Good writing communicates more than information, however. Effective storytellers convey emotion, feeling, and personality. They bring characters and settings to life. Exchanging energy—not just transferring data and facts—occurs whenever a product is used, or an image is seen, or a game is played. That energy comes from the dynamic, world-making relationship between creators and audiences, between makers and users.

Design Is Storytelling is a playbook for creative action. The tools and concepts presented here address today’s dynamic, user-focused design practices. Throughout the book, readers will discover ways to use graphs, diagrams, writing, and other methods of invention and analysis.

Design Is Storytelling unfolds in three main acts. Act I, “Action,” explores the patterns that underlie nearly every story, from the **narrative arc** to the **hero’s journey**. Designers can apply these patterns to users’ relationships with products and services. The process of unboxing a gadget, opening a bank account, or visiting a library follows a dramatic arc with highs and lows, anticipation and suspense. Design is an art of thinking ahead and predicting possible futures. **Scenario planning** and **design fiction** encompass a range of tools and techniques for imagining unknown situations, questioning the status quo, and plotting possible futures.

Act II, “Emotion,” looks at how design plays with our feelings, moods, and associations. **Co-creation** helps designers build empathy with users and create solutions that enhance life. No one is happy all the time. A user’s **emotional journey** can include lows as well as highs, hitting points of annoyance and anger as well as satisfaction.

Act III, “Sensation,” focuses on perception and cognition. Stories hinge on action, and so, too, does human perception. Concepts such as **the gaze**, **Gestalt principles**, and **affordances** reveal that perception is a dynamic process of creating order and meaning. Research in **behavioral economics** shows that small design cues can influence decision making. Perception is active and transformative. The people who see, touch, and use our work participate in its realization. Color and form are gateways to **multisensory design**. Design can guide people in a certain direction, but users will each take their own paths.

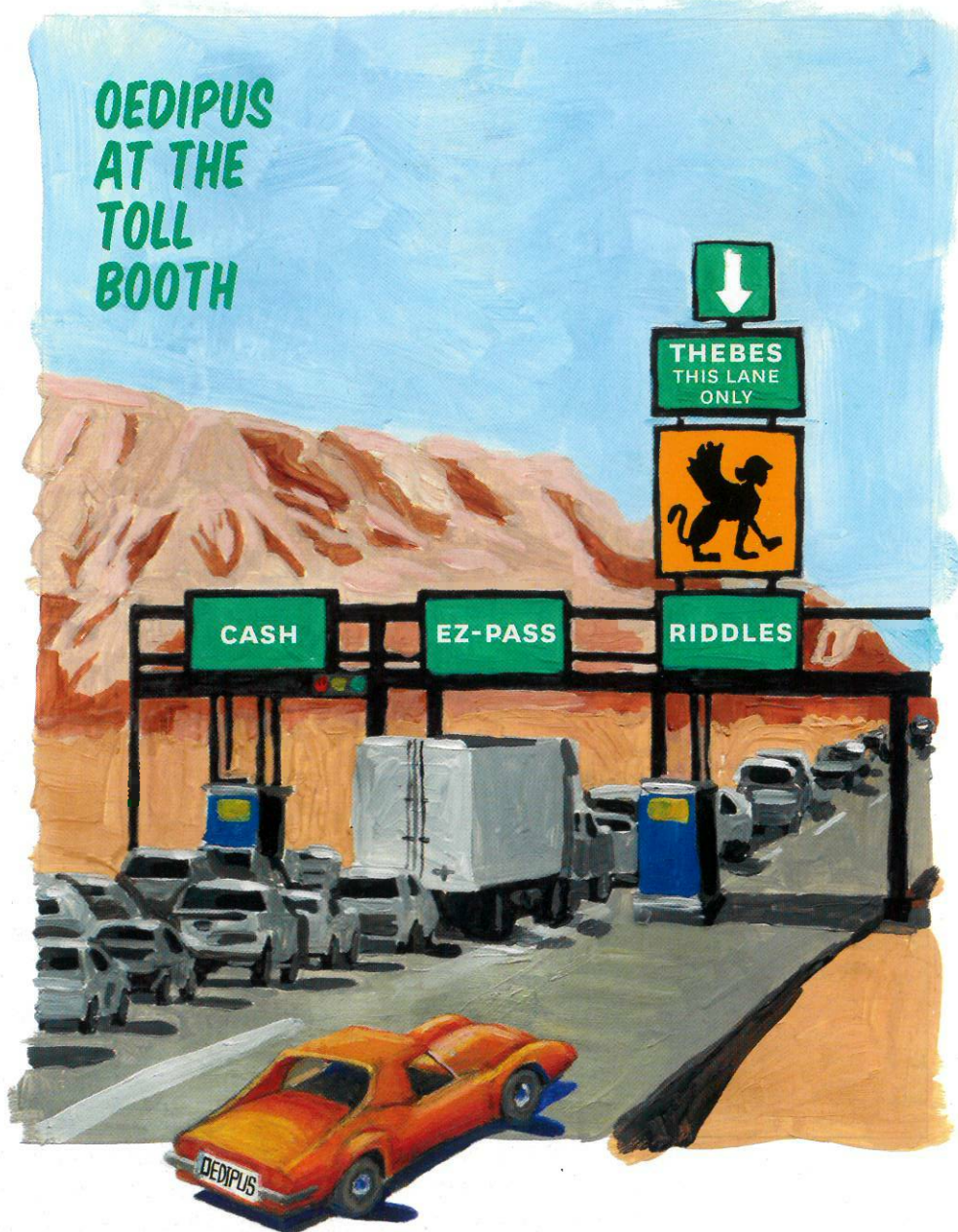
The book wraps up with tools for evaluating projects. Tips for writing will help designers convey clear and active stories. A project generator for students and teachers is a table of mix-and-match, do-it-yourself design challenges to try in the classroom or at home. Finally, a storytelling checklist asks a series of questions about the design process. Does your project depict action? Does your project deliver a call to action to users? Have you built empathy with potential users? Will your project engage viewers in active, creative looking? Have you used design elements to invite action from users?

This is a book about design processes and how to talk about them. Designers use stories to stir emotions and quell uncertainty, to illustrate facts and sway opinions. The process of using an app or planning a trip builds over time, supported along the way with sounds, sights, and physical feedback. Roadblocks and obstacles mar the experience and slow us down (dead batteries, rejected credit cards, or a senseless onslaught of pop-up windows). Each scene in these everyday dramas can be pleasurable or cumbersome, depending on how the experience has been planned.

I hope you will enjoy reading this book, which has been designed for use alongside a designer’s active work process. The book is full of playful pictures, which tell their own stories alongside the written ones. I couldn’t have created this book without support and inspiration from my colleagues at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, and my students and collaborators at MICA.

**Designers today produce
more than logos and cereal
boxes; they create situations
that stimulate the mind and
body over time.**

Act 1 | Action



(Illustration by Ellen Lupton)

ACT 1

Action

At a conference in New Orleans, a young designer asked me what I was working on. He looked gravely concerned when I told him I was writing a book about storytelling. “Have you heard about the mantle of bullshit?” No, I hadn’t.

“Stefan Sagmeister,” he explained, “gave an interview saying that storytelling is bullshit. You should see it.”

In the interview, Sagmeister denounces a designer who creates roller coasters for theme parks and calls himself a storyteller. According to Sagmeister, storytelling is a “mantle of bullshit” that designers use to load up their work with glamour and prestige. A roller coaster designer doesn’t tell stories—he designs roller coasters, and that should be interesting enough on its own.

Yet roller coasters do share a pattern with many stories. The ride starts out on level ground and builds toward a climax. As the cart climbs slowly up the track, it stores energy that will be released in a whooshing drop after the passengers reach the highest point. The energy released by the roller coaster is not only physical but emotional, heard in the ecstatic screams of riders.

Roller coaster designers work to amplify the emotional intensity of the ride, drawing out suspense toward the zenith. In his book *Sonic Boom*, Joel Beckerman writes about a roller coaster designer who inserted a silent pause just before the apex. The unexpected quiet makes riders worry. Is something wrong? Did the machine break? Is something terrible about to happen?

Filmmakers generate suspense with similar techniques, pausing the action before the villain jumps out of the closet. The following pages explore some of the patterns that underlie stories, including the rising and falling energy of the narrative arc and the circular return of the hero’s journey.

THE STORY COASTER



Designers sometimes think of a building, chair, or poster as a static artifact. Yet we experience each of these things over time. A hospital or airport is a sequence of physical spaces (entry halls, receiving zones, passageways, and seating areas). The rooms in a building change from open to compressed, light to dark, warm to cool, soft to hard, to support different uses. Some activities are quick and intense, while others are slow and relaxed. Architecture isn't "frozen music" because it isn't frozen. Time never stands still.

A poster or an illustration is temporal, too. Eyes wander across its surface, darting from detail to detail to build a whole picture, focusing on some areas and leaving others in the background. A book compresses time and space between two covers. A book has a fixed sequence of pages, yet users can enter—and exit—from any point they choose.

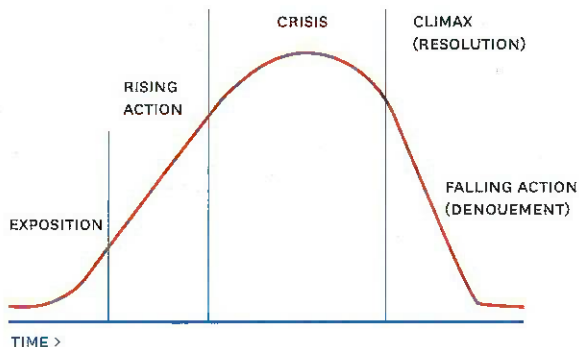
In a novel or movie, the order of events doesn't always match the order in which the audience encounters them. The dastardly deed in a murder mystery often occurs early in the story. Someone has been murdered but we don't know why. (Later we will learn that Bob killed Aunt Mary in order to inherit her rent-controlled apartment.) To write a mystery, the author has to work out the underlying structure (sometimes called the "plot") and then reveal that structure bit by bit (the "story"). The story entices readers with clues and false leads. By the end, the author has shone light into the dark corners of the plot, bringing its secret architecture into view.

Designers plan structures, too. The client's brief for a building or website explains what functions the project will fulfill. A shoe store might need retail space, office space, a stockroom, and a loading dock. A website for the same store might need a product database, e-commerce tools, user accounts, and FAQs. Architects and designers plan the layout of these physical and virtual places as well as plan different paths people could take through them. UX designers use diagrams and site maps to chart the structure of an app or website, and they create user flows to predict potential journeys.

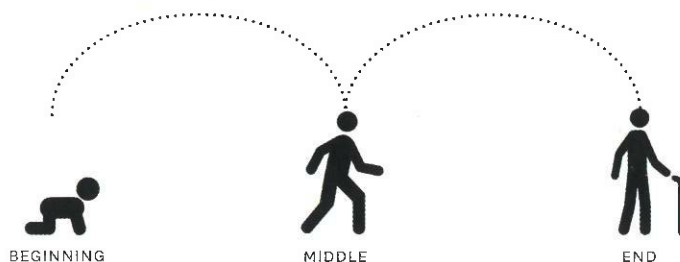
One of the most famous tales in Western literature is *Oedipus Rex*. An oracle tells the king of Thebes that his own son will eventually kill him, so the king wounds his newborn child (Oedipus) and abandons him outdoors to die. (What could possibly go wrong?) A kindly shepherd rescues the baby, who grows up to slay the king in a fit of road rage on his way to destroy the evil Sphinx, a monster blocking the entrance to the city of Thebes. Oedipus defeats the Sphinx and is declared king—an honor that involves marrying the queen. Alas, the queen is Oedipus's mother. When the royal couple discover what they have done, she hangs herself, and he pokes out his eyes. End of story.

Aristotle used *Oedipus Rex* as a universal template for storytelling. The essence of drama, he wrote, is action. Characters, scenery, and moral lessons exist for just one purpose: to underscore the main action of the story. In an effective narrative, the main action must attain sufficient “magnitude,” culminating in dastardly deeds or profound discoveries. The chicken can't just cross the road; she needs a compelling reason to do so (reunite with egg; serve paternity papers to rooster), and she needs to overcome obstacles along the way (roadkill, left-turning cyclist, zealous traffic cop).

Stories ask questions and delay the answers. The main action of any dramatic tale can be phrased as a question (“Will Oedipus escape his fate?” “Will the chicken deep-fry the rooster for his crimes?”). Finding out the answer yields a satisfying ending that completes the action and makes the story whole.



LOOKS LIKE A ROLLER COASTER In the words of Jack Hart, “A true narrative arc sweeps forward across time, pushing ahead with constant motion. It looks like a wave about to break, a pregnant package of stored energy.” Illustration adapted from Jack Hart, *Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).



The Sphinx blocking the gates of Thebes asks every traveler a riddle. She destroys anyone who cannot answer. Here's the riddle: "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs during the day, and three legs at night?" The answer, replies Oedipus, is a human being. He crawls as a baby, walks upright as an adult, and carries a cane in old age. The riddle of the Sphinx divides human life into three parts: beginning, middle, end.

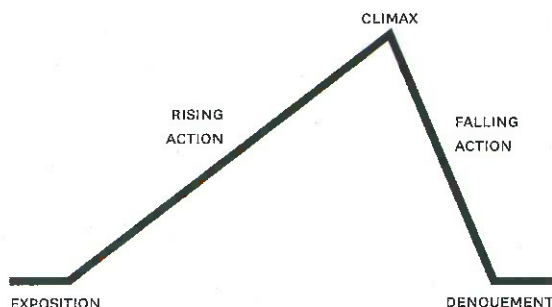
Action drives stories, and it also drives the design process. Design makes things happen in the world. The word "action" is at the heart of "interaction." "Design" is a verb as well as a noun. At the start of the creative process, designers ask what a product or service can do for people—and what *people* can do with *it*. What actions does a product enable? A calendar doesn't just list events. It's a tool for mapping one of life's most precious resources. A photo album isn't just a place to store pictures. It's a way to edit and share personal histories.

Like an absorbing story, a well-designed product, place, or image unfolds over time. It helps us create memories and forge connections. It contains characters, goals, conflicts, and vivid, sensory settings. In a crowd-funding pitch for a theft-resistant bicycle, dramatic camera angles and suspenseful music turn the bike and its riders into crime-fighting heroes. In a shop selling sultry dresses and eccentric housewares, soft light and the scent of nutmeg convey spicy domesticity. Every pie chart, retail space, food package, and hospital room expresses values through language and light, color and shape. We touch design with our minds and bodies. Sound, texture, taste, and smell prompt our actions and fuel our memories.

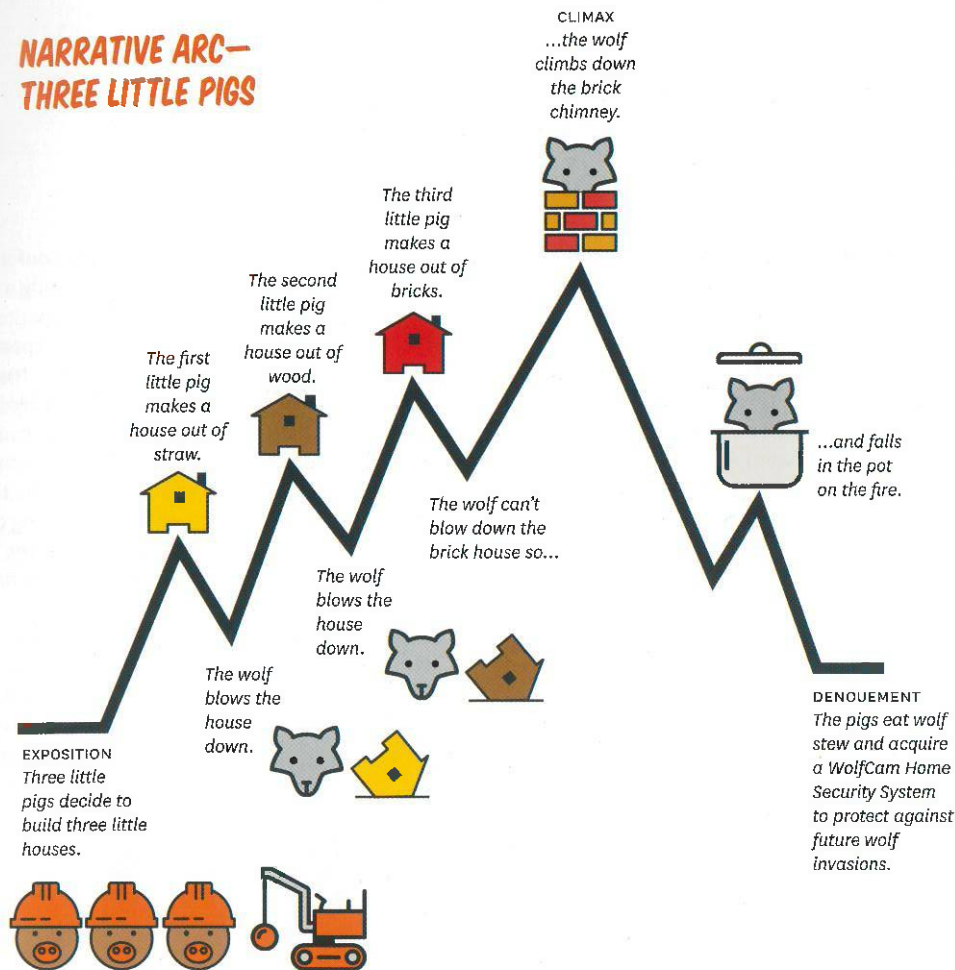
TOOL

Narrative Arc

In 1863, the German playwright and novelist Gustav Freytag created the **narrative arc**. He divided dramatic works into five parts: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion or denouement. Freytag's up-and-down pattern is often visualized as a pyramid, placing the climax at the highest point in the action. This useful diagram is also known as Freytag's pyramid or Freytag's triangle.



NARRATIVE ARC— THREE LITTLE PIGS



THREE LITTLE PIGS Each scene in a story is a smaller arc or pyramid that contributes to the larger shape of the narrative. In the story of “The Three Little Pigs,” the first two pigs build flimsy houses with straw and sticks, and the last pig builds a sturdy house with bricks. Each of the houses brings us closer to the final showdown, when the wolf climbs down the chimney of the brick house and falls into the soup pot. The pigs eat the wolf for dinner and live happily ever after. Wolf illustration by Chanut is Industries.

READ MORE Donna Lichaw, *The User’s Journey: Storymapping Products That People Love* (Brooklyn, NY: Rosenfeld Media, 2016).

Narrative Arc

UPS AND DOWNS Surging from high to low and back again gives stories their satisfying sense of completion. Complex narratives contain stories within stories and conflicts within conflicts.

A narrative begins with an inciting incident or a call to action. Cinderella gets her call to action when the king invites every maiden in the land to the royal ball. If Cinderella went straight to the ball, met the prince, and got married, there would be no story. If the three little pigs all built safe, sturdy houses with affordable mortgage payments in a wolf-free community, there would be no conflict and no problems to solve.

A full-blown novel or film breaks down into dozens of smaller scenes and beats. Nearly every shot in a movie is driven by a goal or intention. In a well-crafted sentence, the verb pulls the subject forward. In a product design, every user action—from logging in to sharing content—is a smaller scene in a larger narrative.

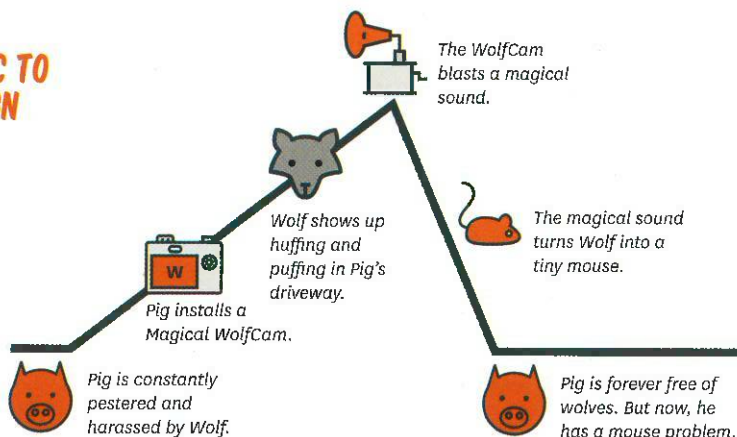
Design decisions support users' goals and intentions. Does a certain color, font, or texture inspire emotions or trigger a response? Does a product's visual and verbal language underscore its use? Are the required steps clear and engaging?

Many experiences that people enjoy conform to the pattern of beginning/middle/end. Eating a falafel sandwich starts with anticipation. The appetite is stoked by the sight and smell of fried chickpeas swaddled in bread, sauce, and vegetables. The experience peaks as the process of eating finally begins. At last, a heavy gut says, "Stop! It's over!" Having sex follows a similar path, reaching a brilliant high point before drifting into mellow satisfaction. Untying a beautifully wrapped gift or popping open a bag of chips signals the beginning of a story. The rustle of paper and the smell of salty snacks fuel our desire.

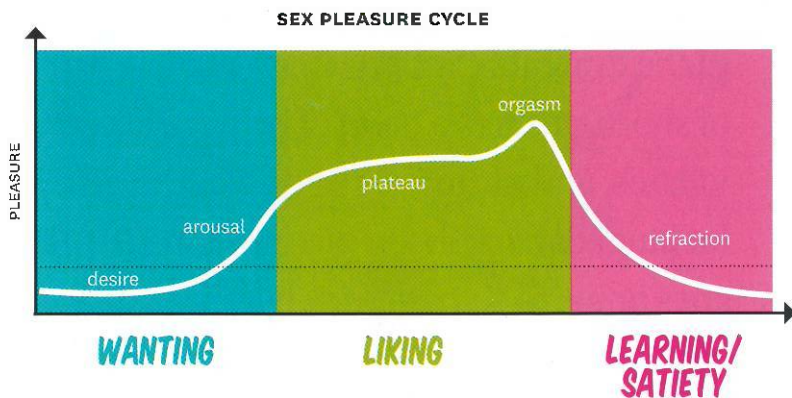
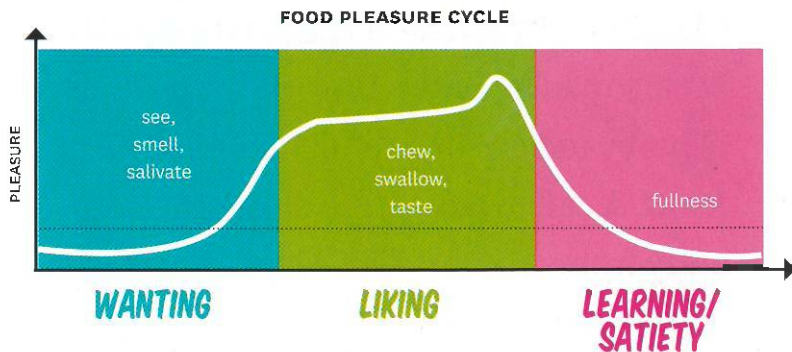
The design of anything from step-by-step instructions to an enticing headline or an onscreen menu can initiate a dramatic arc that moves from low to high, desire to satisfaction. A gentle beep or a reassuring click tells users an action is complete. Designers use the rising and falling arc of narrative to emphasize large and small actions.

APPLYING THE NARRATIVE ARC TO PRODUCT DESIGN

The Magical WolfCam and the Big Bad Wolf



FOOD AND SEX— PLEASURE CYCLES



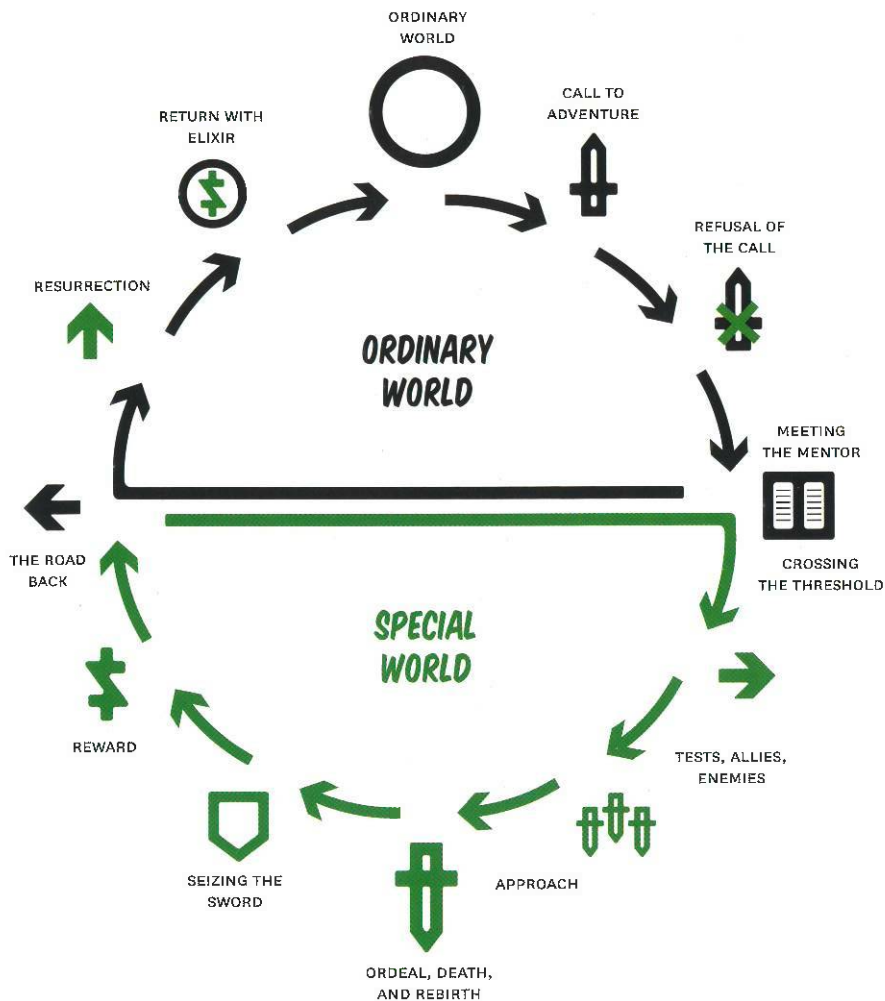
PLEASURE SCIENCE Brain activity rises, peaks, and falls during a good meal or a sexual encounter. This pattern resembles the rising and falling action in a story. Charts adapted from Morten L. Kringsbach, Alan Stein, and Tim J. Hartevelt, "The functional neuroanatomy of food pleasure cycles," *Physiology and Behavior* 106 (2012): 307–316; and J.R. Georgiadis and M. L. Kringsbach, "The human sexual response cycle: Brain imaging evidence linking sex to other pleasures," *Progress in Neurobiology* 98 (2012): 49–81.

TOOL

Hero's Journey

The circular pattern of the **hero's journey** occurs in tales across history, from Homer's *Odyssey* to *Star Wars* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. A call to adventure draws the hero away from ordinary life. Aided by a mentor, a sidekick, or a wise guide, the hero crosses the threshold into the unknown. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy searches for a better existence in the Emerald City. She finds a magic pair of shoes, attracts a band of helpers, battles villains, and ultimately finds what she is looking for back in the place she started. She goes home to Kansas with new knowledge.

ROUND AND ROUND Joseph Campbell traced the hero's journey in his famous book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, published in 1949. He applied the concept of the circular path to numerous examples from world literature. The hero's journey typically includes a call to adventure, the aid of a helper, and a descent into a strange new place—often a “green world” such as an Edenic garden or Emerald City. Illustration by Chris Fodge.

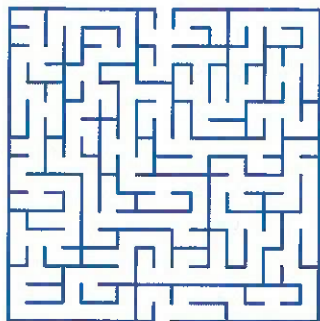


Hero's Journey

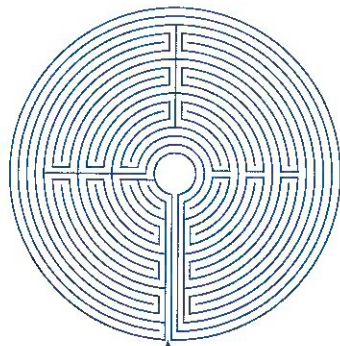
ENTER THE LABYRINTH With its affordable meals and daycare services, an IKEA store can keep an entire family busy for hours. Some shoppers love the store so much, they come and spend the night in the bedding department.

Yet despite the big blue store's popular products and remarkable amenities, sometimes an IKEA store feels like a maze, designed to trap and confuse hapless shoppers. A hero on a quest for a desk chair must endure a gauntlet of living room vignettes and kitchen scenarios before finding the office section. An IKEA store is not, however, a maze. It's a labyrinth! A *maze* is a puzzle with hidden turns and dead ends where a wanderer could be lost forever. A *labyrinth* is a fixed path, designed to carry a person along a controlled journey with a clear beginning and end. Labyrinths have existed in Catholic churches since the Middle Ages. They were invented for meditative purposes, allowing a worshipper to walk in prayer for a great distance within a small space. A labyrinth is designed to be disorienting, but because it provides a single route, the wanderer will never be truly lost.

Architect Alan Penn explains that an IKEA store establishes a guided route that visitors are more or less compelled to follow. After passing through the portal of the Entrance Lobby, shoppers ascend into the Showroom, where miniature rooms entice them to imagine their own homes transformed into compact paradises of modern efficiency. The hero takes notes along the way, collecting locations for items that must be retrieved downstairs in the Warehouse Area. Before reaching the Warehouse, however, the hero must pass through the vast Market Hall, stocked with ready-to-grab kitchen wares and bed linens. At this point, shoppers find themselves suddenly free to put away their tiny pencils and fill their carts with merchandise in a fit of grab-and-go consumption.

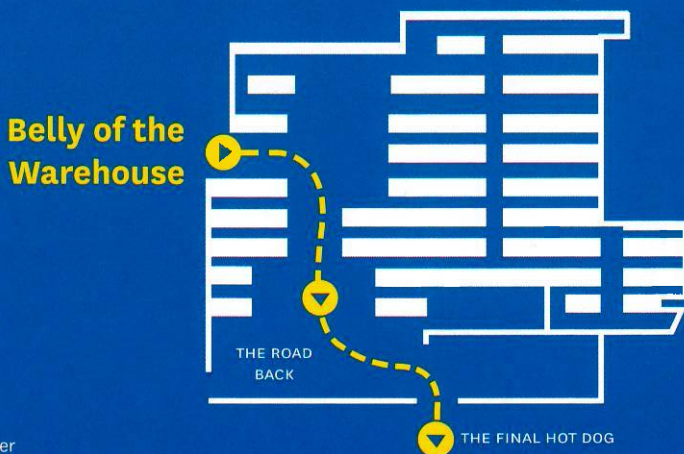
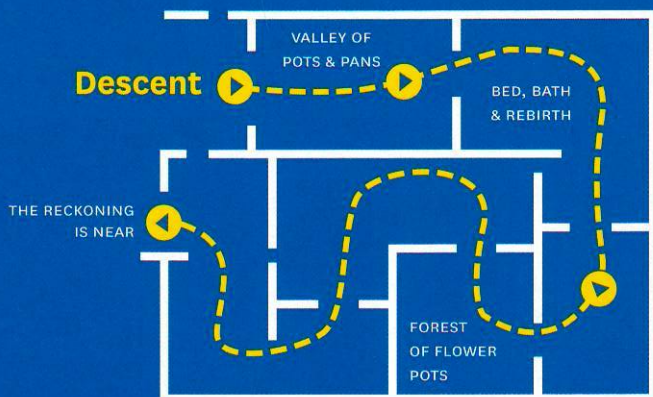
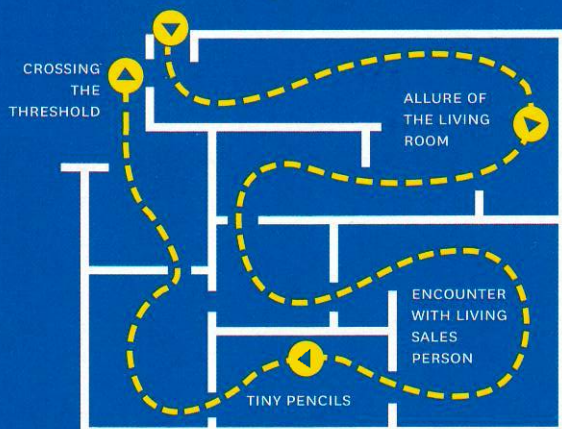


MAZE Puzzle designed to confuse



LABYRINTH Long, guided path

Ordinary World



Hero's Journey

GUIDED PATH A visit to a mall or supermarket can be as a harrowing as the road to Oz. Shopping malls are common triggers for anxiety and panic attacks. Even a normal visit can leave a traveler burdened with credit card debt and dubious treasures.

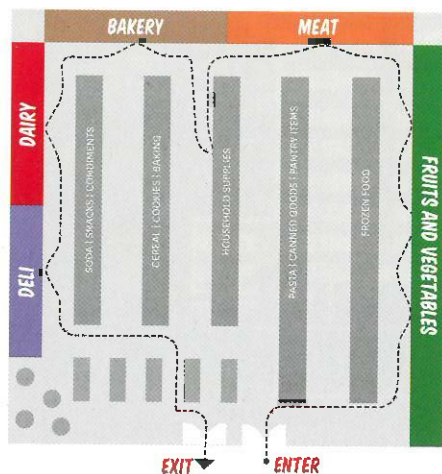
Going to the mall with companions can ease the trauma, unless one is escorted by a bored boyfriend or a pack of angry toddlers instead of a tin man and a cowardly lion.

In the typical American grocery store, fresh food occupies the edge of the store (meat, dairy, produce, bakery, and prepared foods). Food activist Michael Pollan warns the intrepid traveler to stay at the green edge of the store as much as possible. However, to find a package of quinoa or gummy bears, you will have to venture deep inside what grocery executives call the *center store*, stocked with shelf after shelf of brightly colored cans, bags, and boxes.

Exhibition designers also grapple with guiding visitors along a path. In their pioneering work “Fundamentals of Exhibition Design” (1939), Bauhaus veterans Herbert Bayer and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy explain how to create a guided

path through a series of galleries. At the time, museums typically were designed as boxy rooms connected by symmetrical doorways. Although plans designed with this traditional central axis seem calm and orderly, Bayer and Moholy-Nagy found—surprisingly—that halls with asymmetrical openings actually move people along in a more controlled way.

Bayer and Moholy-Nagy advocated a multisensory, multimedia approach to exhibition design, employing graphic arrows, phonographic recordings, and mechanized “moving carpets” to move people through space. Today, curators and exhibition designers continue to use signage, lighting, sound, barriers, and distinctive landmarks to compel visitors to follow a linear narrative. At the end of the labyrinth, they will often find a gift shop.

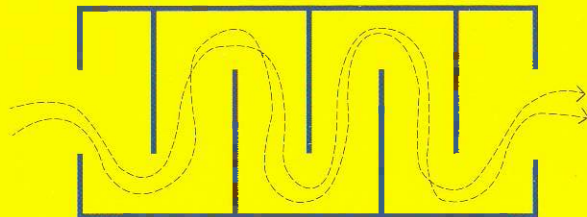
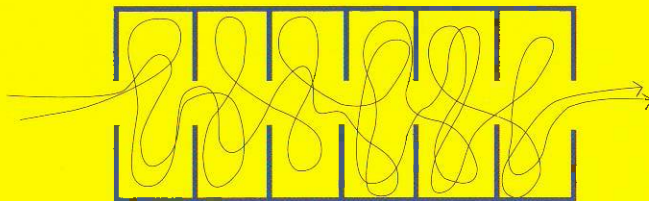


ODYSSEY OF THE SUPERMARKET The healthier food in a supermarket is concentrated around the edges of the store, while processed foods dominate the center. Many fresh foods require refrigeration and access to kitchen areas, which makes it economical for stores to keep those goods in the outer zone. Illustration by Jennifer Tobias.

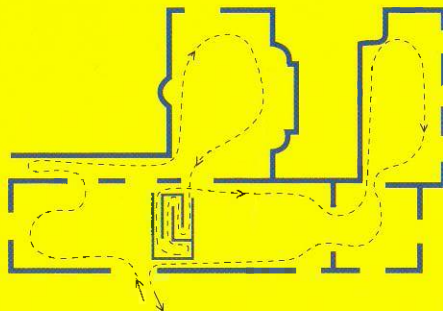
READ MORE Herbert Bayer and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, “Fundamentals of Exhibition Design,” The New York Public Library Digital Collections, 1939-12-1940-01; Alan Penn, “The Complexity of the Elementary Interface: Shopping Space,” University College London; Michael Pollan, *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Michael Powell, “All Lost in the Supermarket,” *Limn*, Issue Four: Food Infrastructures (May 2014). <http://limn.it/all-lost-in-the-supermarket/>; accessed June 12, 2016.

EXHIBITION JOURNEY

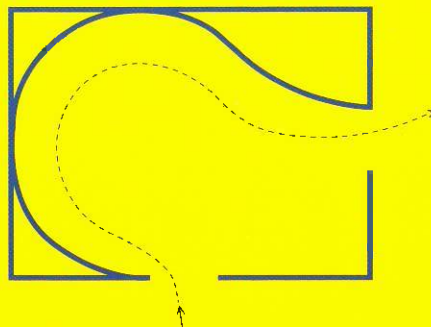
SYMMETRY VS. ASYMMETRY Classical museum buildings feature halls that lead into each other with symmetrically placed doorways. Although the floor plan looks orderly, visitors don't know where to go first when they enter a new gallery. Asymmetrical openings allow curators to control the narrative.



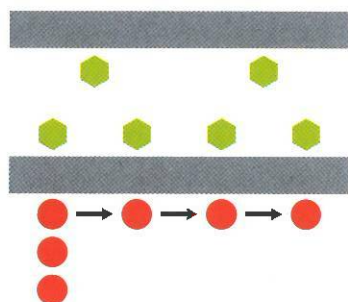
ODD-SHAPED ROOMS Exhibition designers use barriers and wall graphics to move visitors through an assortment of odd rooms.



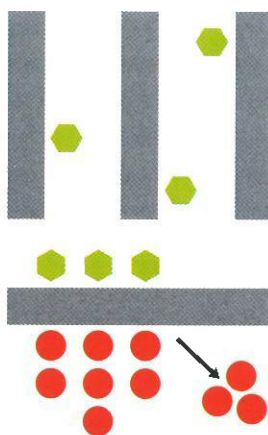
ONE PATH, ONE STORY Curators and designers can sometimes produce a unified experience by creating a simple and unambiguous path. This may not be the most satisfying experience for visitors.



FAST FOOD DRAMA SCHOOL



CHIPOTLE



MCDONALD'S

MAPPING A SERVICE Any product or service has a plot. Designers ask, "What is the desired action? How does the user complete the action?" People go to a restaurant not just for the food, but for a satisfying experience. At Chipotle, guests participate in a drama. The process is active and transparent. At McDonald's,

customers wait in line to order and then wait in line again to pick up food. Food is prepared in the background by servers who don't communicate directly with customers. A palpable sense of passive waiting clouds the experience.

Hero's Journey

RESTAURANT AS THEATER Designing a fast-food business involves more than figuring out what food to serve. It requires architecture, interiors, logos, packaging, menus, social media strategies, and ways to move customers in and out of the store.

A visit to a fast-food restaurant is an adventure in design and branding. The intrepid hero seeking sustenance waits in line, orders a dish, and pays the bill. Sound, materials, and graphics add atmosphere and build dramatic tension. The store layout supplies a consistent pattern of action.

At the burrito-bowl purveyor Chipotle, customers participate in constructing the meal. As they select beans, cheese, and four kinds of salsa to fill their cardboard vessels, they take part in an active drama. Price lists and calorie counts build emotional tension. The process is transparent rather than hidden, allowing them to witness the food they are about to eat while absorbing the sound, sight, and smell of meat sizzling in the background. By the time they reach the register, their food is ready to go. Chips, drinks, and guacamole complicate the final reckoning.

For contrast, imagine a trip to McDonald's. Customers wait in line, tell the cashier what they want, pay their bill, and then wait again. They may not be sure *where* to wait—there's no clearly designated spot, just a huddled mass of other customers with hunger in their hearts and receipts in their hands. They never interact with the people who prepare their food—these employees are busy in the middle ground or hidden away in a mechanized netherworld. This disconnected process neither empowers customers to serve themselves nor involves them in a satisfying

action. The McDonald's user flow is convenient for McDonald's but not especially pleasing to patrons, while the flow at Chipotle is fun and engaging.

Dozens of restaurants in the "fast casual" market segment—from the salad chain Chopt to the Korean diner Korilla—have embraced a transparent and engaging process similar to Chipotle's. Some restaurants have concierges to help customers through the process, keeping the line moving while keeping the process interesting. Meanwhile, as these more personal fast-food experiences become popular, customers are also seeking radically impersonal services—choosing to order online and pick up food or have it delivered with as little human contact as possible. Services like Seamless and Deliveroo cater to this ATM model of food service, while delivery-only restaurants have become another business model.

Every brand tells a story about a business, product, service, or place. Chipotle's Mexican-themed interiors underscore the adventure of ordering food. Room dividers and trash kiosks made from corrugated metal suggest low-cost construction in a Mexican village. In many Chipotle outlets, loud music, hard surfaces, and narrow stools encourage people to eat quickly or carry their food out the door. Whereas soft chairs and WiFi in a coffee shop encourage longer visits—and a second cup of joe—Chipotle has little to gain from slowing down the pace.

**Where must we go, we who wander this wasteland,
in search of our better selves?**

MAD MAX: FURY ROAD, GEORGE MILLER, DIRECTOR