

The Application of Dramatic Structure in Digital Game Design and Its Impact on Player Emotions

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Abstract: This study explores how dramatic structure in digital game design engages players and evokes emotional responses. Dramatic structures typically consist of five stages: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Denouement, which share similarities with game design frameworks that require clear objectives, conflicts, and outcomes to maintain player engagement. The research investigates how each stage elicits emotional shifts in players and amplifies immersion. Through detailed analysis and case studies of popular games, the findings indicate that dramatic structure strengthens narrative cohesion and provides a reliable framework for managing tension and emotional pacing. Game developers can use these insights to create more immersive and emotionally engaging experiences, fostering stronger emotional connections between players and virtual worlds. This framework has the potential to shape the future of game design by aligning storytelling with player agency, resulting in games that evoke lasting emotional responses. This study offers practical guidelines for developers aiming to increase a game's emotional investment and overall appeal.

Keywords: Dramatic Structure, Game Design Framework, Player Engagement, Emotional Response.

1. Introduction

As the gaming industry continues to grow, designers are seeking ways to create more immersive and emotionally engaging experiences. One promising approach is integrating dramatic structure, traditionally used in storytelling forms like books, theater, and film. Like these mediums, games use objectives, conflicts, and outcomes to keep players invested. By applying the classic dramatic arc—Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Denouement—designers can shape players' emotional journeys, making gaming experiences more impactful. Still, there remains a gap in understanding how these distinct stages influence emotional engagement and immersion in games.

This study aims to bridge that gap by examining how each phase of the dramatic arc evokes emotions and sustains engagement. Through theoretical analysis and case studies from popular games, it proposes a new storytelling framework based on dramatic principles, offering developers a practical method to craft emotionally resonant games. Ultimately, the research asks, "How can the stages of dramatic structure impact player emotions and engagement?" By addressing this, the study provides insights for designing games that feel more immersive and emotionally compelling.

2. Dramatic Structure in Game Design

Comparing dramatic structure and game design frameworks reveals intriguing parallels and differences. Both aim to craft engaging experiences but from distinct perspectives. Dramatic structure, tied to storytelling and theater, follows a well-defined arc, while popular game design frameworks like MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) focus on interactive experiences for players [1]. Another framework, the SSM (System, Story, Mental Model) Framework, adds further layers to game interpretation [2].

2.1. Dramatic Structure Overview

Dramatic structure traditionally includes five key stages: exposition, where characters, setting, and conflict are introduced; rising action, which builds tension; climax, the peak moment of tension; falling action, the aftermath of the climax; and resolution, where the conflict is resolved [3].

2.2. Comparison of Dramatic Structure and Game Design Frameworks

Nonetheless, game design frameworks emphasize different aspects of experience creation. The MDA framework breaks this down into three components: mechanics (the rules defining functionality), dynamics (behaviors that emerge from player interactions), and aesthetics (emotional responses evoked) [4]. On the other hand, the SSM framework divides games into system (the code and simulation defining functionality), story (the narrative that provides meaning to the system's events), and mental model (the player's understanding and interpretation of how the game works and what it represents) [2].

Key distinctions emerge in the nature of engagement. Dramatic structure is linear, guiding audiences through a set narrative, while game design is interactive and often non-linear, allowing players to influence outcomes [5]. Dramatic structure relies on narrative and character development to evoke emotions, whereas game design engages players through agency, feedback loops, and their understanding of the game world [6]. Conflicts in drama are typically resolved by the end, while games can have ongoing conflicts with multiple resolutions. In dramatic storytelling, the audience is passive, but in game design, players are active participants, shaping their experience through decisions [7]. Modern media often blend these approaches, with games like *The Last of Us* enhancing storytelling using dramatic structures while maintaining interactive elements [8]. By understanding these frameworks, designers can create more compelling experiences in both traditional narratives and interactive media.

2.3. Emotional Engagement through Dramatic Structure

Emotional engagement through dramatic structure explores how drama evokes emotional responses. Techniques such as character development, conflict resolution, pacing, and symbolism immerse players in the narrative. These tools deepen emotional connections, making experiences resonate long after gameplay is over.

Character development is one of the key components [9]. Relatable characters enable audiences to connect emotionally [10]. When characters experience familiar emotions, players become invested in their journeys. In addition to the character, conflict, and resolution also play crucial roles. The tension from conflicts keeps players engaged, while resolutions provide emotional release [11]. Whether through happy or tragic endings, resolving conflicts leaves a lasting impression. Along with the storyline, how the story is told—by pacing and timing—is equally important in shaping emotional engagement. Careful timing of climaxes and resolutions enhances impact [12]. A well-paced narrative builds emotions naturally, reaching climaxes at the right moments. Besides, symbolism and

themes add emotional depth. Stories exploring universal themes through symbols resonate on a subconscious level, evoking emotions tied to players' experiences [13]. Thus, players connect with both characters and themes, creating lasting emotional engagement.

Like traditional drama, games with strong narratives that include well-developed characters, tense conflict, and carefully timed events enhance emotional experiences. Conclusively, traditional theatrical works and interactive gameplay can both stir emotions profoundly, strengthening players' connections to the narrative.

2.4. Stages of Dramatic Structure and Player Emotions

The stages of dramatic structure significantly impact player emotions in narrative-driven games, guiding their emotional journey from curiosity to satisfaction. Emotional engagement often builds through player agency, but many games also borrow from dramatic structures. These stages create a structured emotional journey that enhances player investment as they progress through the narrative, from initial curiosity to climactic decision-making and eventual reflection.

2.4.1. Exposition: Setting the Scene and Establishing Emotional Context

In the exposition stage, the game introduces its world, characters, and initial conflict, igniting players' curiosity and engagement with the narrative [3].

2.4.2. Rising Action: Building Tension and Player Involvement

As the plot progresses, the rising action introduces challenges, building tension and driving the story forward, evoking excitement and anticipation [14]. Players become more involved as trials escalate.

2.4.3. Climax: Peak Emotional Experience and Decision-making

The climax marks the story's turning point, where players experience intense emotions and make critical decisions [14]. This stage empowers players, as they feel the weight of their choices on the narrative's outcome.

2.4.4. Falling Action: Emotional Resolution and Consequences

The falling action resolves conflicts, shifting emotions from high tension to contemplation as players reflect on their decisions and the story's resolution [3].

2.4.5. Denouement: Closure and Player Reflection

The outcome provides closure, wrapping up subplots and allowing players to reflect on the themes and their journey [15]. This reflective moment bridges the emotional closure of the game with its lasting impact.

Accordingly, these stages of dramatic structure closely reflect the emotional journeys players experience, aligning with their engagement. Game designers can create immersive experiences that resonate long after gameplay by guiding emotions from curiosity to satisfaction.

3. Case Studies of Dramatic Structure in Games

3.1. Case Study 1: The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild masterfully engages players emotionally through its usage of dramatic structure, guiding them on a journey filled with curiosity, excitement, intensity, and reflection, while offering deep connections to events and characters.

3.1.1. Exposition: Setting the Scene and Establishing Emotional Context

The game opens with Link, the protagonist, awakening in the Shrine of Resurrection after a century of sleep, without memory of his past. This aligns players with Link's curiosity, setting an emotional tone as both explore the vast Hyrule. The initial cutscene introduces the Sheikah Slate and the threat of Calamity Ganon, hooking players into the story [16].

3.1.2. Rising Action: Building Tension and Player Involvement

As Link explores Hyrule, tension builds with increasingly complex obstacles, from battling enemies to solving puzzles. Discovering the Divine Beasts and freeing them from Ganon's control raises the stakes, keeping players invested in the fate of Hyrule and pushing them to uncover more of the story [17].

3.1.3. Climax: Peak Emotional Experience and Decision-making

The emotional peak occurs when Link faces Calamity Ganon in Hyrule Castle. This battle, the culmination of the player's journey, hinges on their choices, skills, and progress, delivering a thrilling sense of empowerment [16].

3.1.4. Falling Action: Emotional Resolution and Consequences

After defeating Ganon, Hyrule's immediate danger is resolved, with a computer-generated (CG) scene wrapping up loose ends like the fate of the Divine Beasts and the return of peace, giving players a sense of relief and reflection [17].

3.1.5. Denouement: Closure and Player Reflection

In the final CG, Link and Zelda reunite, planning to rebuild Hyrule. This offers players closure and satisfaction as they reflect on broader themes like courage and resilience, leaving a lasting impression [16].

3.1.6. Players Choice Impact

Furthermore, the game's exploration and choice structure adds depth to its narrative. Players can explore Hyrule and approach objectives, like tackling Divine Beasts or fighting Ganon, in any order. Combat is equally flexible, with strategies like stealth, archery, or melee, empowering players to shape their journey. Side quests and NPC interactions enrich the emotional experience, making Hyrule feel alive and deepening player immersion [18]. For these reasons, *Breath of the Wild* delivers a deeply personal, emotionally engaging experience shaped by player choice through its dynamic storytelling and dramatic structure.

3.2. Case Study 2: The Last of Us

The Last of Us deftly uses dramatic structure to engage players emotionally, weaving a linear yet beautiful and heart-wrenching narrative of survival, love, and sacrifice. Tough decisions and intense moments immerse players in the world and the characters' perspectives.

3.2.1. Exposition: Setting the Scene and Establishing Emotional Context

The game begins with Joel and his daughter, Sarah, on the eve of a fungal outbreak that devastates the world. Joel's tragic personal loss immediately draws players in, establishing emotional stakes and curiosity about the collapse of the world [8].

3.2.2. Rising Action: Building Tension and Player Involvement

As Joel and Ellie journey across post-apocalyptic America, they face dangers like infected monsters and hostile humans. The growing bond between them forms the emotional core, with each challenge raising stakes and building anticipation for their relationship and the unfolding story [8].

3.2.3. Climax: Peak Emotional Experience and Decision-making

The narrative peak occurs when Joel reaches the Fireflies' hospital and learns that Ellie must die to create a cure for the outbreak. Faced with this moral dilemma, Joel violently rescues Ellie, forcing players into intense emotional conflict as his actions reflect their shared journey and the complex ethics of survival [8].

3.2.4. Falling Action: Emotional Resolution and Consequences

After rescuing Ellie, Joel lies to her about what happened at the hospital. While the immediate tension resolves, the emotional impact of Joel's choice lingers, leaving players to ponder the consequences of his actions for Ellie and the world [8].

3.2.5. Denouement: Closure and Player Reflection

Joel and Ellie return to Tommy's settlement, where Ellie questions Joel's story. Though she doubts him, she accepts his explanation, offering closure but also sparking deeper questions about the game's moral complexities and the cost of Joel's choices [8].

3.2.6. Players Choice Impact

Although *The Last of Us* follows a linear narrative, player choices influence its emotional depth. Players choose between combat styles—stealth or direct engagement—each shaping the suspense and intensity of gameplay [19]. Resource management also plays a key role, with limited supplies forcing players into tough decisions, and heightening tension [20]. In the same way, character interactions enrich the emotional experience, unlocking story elements and deepening the player's connection to the narrative. Joel's decision to save Ellie, despite its global consequences, forces players to reflect on the morality of his actions, adding further emotional complexity [19]. Exploration rewards players with hidden backstory elements, enhancing their immersion and engagement with the world [20]. Hence, even though *The Last of Us* is in linear storytelling, its emotionally rich structure offers players a profound and thought-provoking experience.

3.3. Analysis of Emotional Triggers in Gameplay

In *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, key emotional triggers enhance player engagement. One major element is the thrill of exploration, where players discover secrets and diverse landscapes, fostering curiosity and wonder [21]. The sense of accomplishment is also significant, with players overcoming enemies and solving puzzles, rewarding perseverance [22]. Emotional connections are formed through character development, with players empathizing with Link, Zelda, and others. The game's stunning visuals and music deepen immersion, making the world feel alive. Player choice further enhances engagement, as decisions shape outcomes and provide empowerment [21]. The ongoing conflict with Calamity Ganon builds tension, with the final victory offering emotional closure [23].

In *The Last of Us*, character relationships drive emotional impact, especially the evolving bond between Joel and Ellie, which fosters empathy and investment. The narrative is filled with dramatic moments, from loss to sacrifice, keeping players engaged. The post-apocalyptic setting, detailed environments, and sound design immerse players in a tense atmosphere. Moral dilemmas, such as Joel's decision to save Ellie, challenge players' values, deepening emotional engagement. The game's intense combat and survival mechanics evoke anxiety but reward perseverance. Themes of loss and sacrifice add emotional depth, intertwining players with the narrative of survival and hope [24].

4. Establishing a Dramatic Structure-based Game Design Framework

4.1. Framework Development

This framework applies dramatic structure to game design, blending narrative, gameplay, and emotional triggers for a compelling experience. Inspired by *Breath of the Wild* and *The Last of Us*, the framework divides games into phases, each enhancing emotional engagement.

4.1.1. Exposition: Introduction and World Building

In this phase, players are introduced to the game world and characters, building emotional investment. The vastness of the world encourages exploration and curiosity. The atmosphere and visuals set the tone, immersing players, whether in the peaceful landscapes of *Breath of the Wild* or the decayed ruins of *The Last of Us*. Emotional triggers here focus on curiosity, wonder, and empathy.

4.1.2. Rising Action: Challenges and Growth

Conflict and challenges push players forward, developing skills and deepening emotional bonds with characters. Increased difficulty, whether through combat or puzzles, provides a sense of achievement. Character relationships evolve, and players feel more connected, fostering excitement and satisfaction.

4.1.3. Climax: Moral Dilemmas and High Stakes

Emotional stakes peak as players face moral dilemmas and intense challenges. Choices carry weight, with significant consequences, reflecting the player's values. The gameplay intensifies, heightening anxiety and empowerment during pivotal moments.

4.1.4. Falling Action: Resolution and Reflection

Players process the consequences of their actions, offering emotional relief and reflection. Exploration continues but with a greater understanding of the narrative. Emotional triggers shift to satisfaction and tension relief as the story begins to conclude.

4.1.5. Denouement: Conclusion and Emotional Closure

The final phase resolves conflicts, leaving players with a sense of accomplishment. Themes of loss and sacrifice may deepen emotional impact, providing a satisfying conclusion while allowing for future exploration.

4.2. Key Pillars of the Framework

At the essence of this framework are several key pillars that drive emotional engagement. Player agency is crucial, giving control over choices and actions. Emotional engagement builds through exploration, challenges, and moral dilemmas, leading to a meaningful climax and resolution. Balancing tension and relief maintains engagement, while the seamless integration of narrative and gameplay adds emotional depth. Exploration remains central, continuously rewarding players with discoveries.

4.3. Discussion

4.3.1. Challenges in Integrating Dramatic Structure into Games

Integrating dramatic structure into game design can enhance emotional depth and narrative engagement, but it faces several challenges stemming from differences in game genres, player expectations, and technological limitations.

One key challenge is balancing player agency with narrative control. While players enjoy the freedom to shape outcomes, dramatic structures rely on linear progression with set moments of tension and resolution. Too much narrative control can restrict player freedom, while too much agency can weaken emotional moments. This balance is harder to achieve in open-world games but easier in linear story-driven games.

Another challenge is pacing. Dramatic structures depend on controlled pacing to build and release tension, but games often let players dictate the flow. Action or RPG games with side quests disrupt cohesive pacing, while more linear games allow developers better control over narrative flow.

Ensuring emotional consistency between gameplay and story is another issue. Emotional storytelling can be undermined by repetitive combat mechanics or trivialized gameplay, especially in action or shooter games. Puzzle or strategy games, regardless, often align better with emotional beats due to their mechanics.

Player skill variation also complicates dramatic structure. Less skilled players may struggle to reach critical narrative moments, while highly skilled players might rush through emotional peaks. This issue is especially prominent in competitive or skill-based genres like fighting games, souls-like, or platformers, such as *Street Fighter*, *Elden Ring*, and *Cuphead*, where ensuring a consistent emotional experience across varying skill levels is difficult. Flexible difficulty settings in games like RPGs can help adapt emotional flow to varying player abilities.

Replayability is a concern when using a strong dramatic structure. Once key plot points are known, tension and surprise diminish, affecting replay value. In contrast, procedurally generated titles or roguelike games, such as *Don't Starve* and *Minecraft*, may prioritize mechanics and emergent storytelling over a tightly structured emotional arc.

Choice-based systems present another challenge. Games allowing player choices, such as *Mass Effect* or *Detroit: Become Human*, can have branching narratives that may weaken the emotional impact if not carefully managed. Linear adventure games, nevertheless, like *The Last of Us*, provide more control over the emotional trajectory.

Cultural and player expectation differences also impact how dramatic structure is received. Emotional triggers and themes may resonate differently across cultures, making it hard to design a universally appealing narrative. Global titles like *Black Myth: Wukong* must balance diverse cultural storytelling norms to avoid alienating players unfamiliar with specific cultural references.

To address these challenges, game designers can explore dynamic storytelling techniques that adapt to player choices, refine mechanics to enhance narrative, and introduce flexible difficulty and pacing. Advances in AI and procedural generation offer the potential for more personalized and adaptive dramatic structures. As gaming continues to grow globally, understanding diverse cultural perspectives will be vital to creating resonance narratives. Despite the challenges, integrating dramatic structure into games offers immense potential to elevate storytelling, allowing designers to craft emotionally meaningful experiences that resonate long after gameplay ends.

4.3.2. Application to Different Game Genres

Applying dramatic structure to different game genres requires considering each genre's unique mechanics and emotional engagement strategies. Role-playing games (RPGs), like *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, are well-suited for dramatic structures due to their storytelling focus. Emotional arcs can be woven into quests and moral choices, but preserving emotional weight while allowing multiple narrative outcomes is challenging. In action-adventure games, such as *Uncharted*, dramatic structure is more straightforward due to linear progression, blending storytelling with fast-paced action. Even so, balancing emotional depth during intense gameplay remains a challenge. Open-world games, like *Elden Ring*, give players freedom, which disrupts the intended emotional arc. Emotional engagement often stems from players' personal journeys, making each experience unique. Puzzle and strategy games, like *Inscription*, use tension and resolution to create emotional engagement. These genres typically lack strong narratives but evoke emotion through gameplay mechanics. Horror games, like *Detention*, while maintaining tension while allowing player control is difficult, naturally fit dramatic structure due to the tension and release cycle, resembling traditional narrative arcs. In multiplayer games, like *League of Legends*, emotional engagement emerges through player interactions and achievements rather than structured narratives, making traditional dramatic structure harder to apply. In general, integrating dramatic structure into games offers opportunities for emotional storytelling but requires genre-specific approaches to balance narrative with gameplay and player agency. Successful application depends on adapting narrative principles to each genre's strengths while meeting players' expectations.

4.3.3. Evaluating Emotional Impact and Potential for Enhancing Player Immersion

Evaluating the emotional impact and enhancing immersion through a dramatic structure-based game design framework opens the door to richer experiences. By integrating carefully crafted narrative arcs, designers can create deeper emotional bonds, drawing players further into the game world. This approach amplifies immersion and gives players a stronger sense of involvement, making the experience more memorable and emotionally resonant. Narrative structures in game design offer an opportunity to heighten both emotional depth and engagement.

Dramatic structures, like rising action, climax, and resolution, help guide players through emotional highs and lows, similar to films or literature. This emotional rhythm, combined with predictable key moments such as climactic battles, keeps players invested. A prime example is *The*

Last of Us, where Joel's decision to save Ellie creates a lasting emotional climax. Character and story development within dramatic arcs allow players to connect emotionally with evolving characters. As characters face challenges, players become invested in their journey, fostering empathy and deeper involvement in the story. The tension-and-release cycle, a core element of dramatic structure, boosts immersion. The pacing of rising tension followed by emotional payoffs makes climactic moments more impactful, like in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, where the build-up to the final battle heightens emotional stakes. World-building, atmosphere, and aesthetics further enhance immersion. Emotional tones are reinforced by the environment, music, and lighting, as seen in *Hollow Knight*, where a haunting atmosphere reflects themes of loss and perseverance. Games with choice-based narratives amplify emotional engagement by giving players agency over story outcomes. This deepens their emotional investment and personalizes the experience.

Emotional catharsis, achieved through satisfying narrative resolutions, provides a sense of closure and lasting impact, reinforcing the emotional journey, while sustaining emotional engagement requires balancing tension and release throughout gameplay, preventing burnout, and maintaining narrative immersion. However, challenges such as pacing in open-world games or player skill mismatches can disrupt the emotional flow. Designers must balance difficulty and emotional narrative to maintain immersion.

To sum up, the dramatic structure-based design framework offers a powerful tool for creating emotionally impactful, immersive experiences. Balancing narrative control with player agency ensures the emotional arc resonates without sacrificing interactivity. This approach can elevate games into emotionally rich journeys that players remember long after playing.

4.3.4. Future Directions in Game Design and Emotional Engagement

All in all, this framework has the potential to shape the future of game design by deepening emotional engagement and crafting immersive, narrative-driven experiences. As gaming evolves, designers can blend traditional narrative arcs with emergent gameplay and player choice, creating games that not only entertain but evoke enduring emotions and emotional connections with virtual worlds.

5. Conclusion

This study has dug into the nuances of dramatic structure and game design integration to enhance emotional engagement and player immersion. After mapping the five traditional stages of dramatic structure—Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, and Denouement—onto game design frameworks, it becomes clear that dramatic structure elements can shape the emotional experiences of players in ways that parallel other storytelling mediums. As each stage presents a unique touch point to evoke distinct emotional responses, game developers can take advantage of this finding to create more meaningful and memorable gameplay experiences.

Moreover, through the case studies and theoretical analysis explored in this research, it is evident that dramatic structure not only enhances narrative cohesion but also provides a reliable framework for managing tension and emotional pacing. This contributes to a more dynamic and immersive experience where players feel emotionally connected to the characters and the virtual worlds they inhabit. By carefully distributing moments of conflict, resolution, and emotional payoff, game designers can ensure that players remain engaged throughout the narrative arc, fostering deeper investment in the gameplay experience.

Looking forward, the findings of this research suggest that the future of game design lies in the refinement of a balance between narrative control and player agency. As games become a form of art, there will be increasing opportunities to blend traditional narrative arcs with interactive elements that allow for personalized, emergent gameplay. By embracing dramatic structure as a tool for emotional

engagement, developers can create games that entertain while evoking lasting emotional responses, thus constructing stronger connections between players and their in-game experiences.

In conclusion, this study provides a foundation for a game design framework rooted in dramatic principles, offering practical insights for designers aiming to create emotionally compelling games. As the gaming industry continues to advance, the integration of narrative techniques like dramatic structure will be key to crafting experiences that go beyond entertainment and resonate on a deeper emotional level. Future game design can push the boundaries of player engagement and emotional immersion by fine-tuning and expanding upon these ideas, eventually transforming how users interact with digital worlds.

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