Notes from a presentation by Matthew Luhn on storytelling

Introduction
Matthew Luhn is a writer and story consultant who has worked at Pixar for twenty years. His web site is www.matthewluhn.com. On Sunday 13 March 2017 he ran a four hour workshop on storytelling for movies. This is a transcription of my notes from that workshop.

Presentation
It’s possible to make a convincing story pitch from almost any combination of characters and situations, but that pitch has to contain certain dramatic elements if it’s to be convincing. These are:

- good structure
- believable characters
- a story arc

We start with what are called blue sky ideas. What if? … When defined, these are also known as premises or loglines. From that we can identify unusual and unexpected storylines which include conflict or dramatic events. From this judgment free ideation session, plot concepts will emerge that have three essential elements:

- a setup
- a build
- a payoff

Note that too much time thinking about this is bad. A hard deadline is essential if decisions are to be made, and destructive editing is part of the creative process. At Pixar movie pitches are heard by other creative executives and not financial professionals, so that unusual ideas can survive the pitch process and go on to be green lighted – given the funding to proceed.

So – what’s in a pitch? It’s the single sentence often referred to as the elevator pitch. Suppose you’re in an elevator with the one person who can give you the backing to move forward with a project. You’re on the first floor and they’ve just pushed the second floor button. What can you say to convince them to support you (or at least talk more)?

For an animation, it has to include these four elements:

- a main character changing
- a clear location of the story
- an opposition or villain (antagonist)
- a catalyst or goal
Start your elevator pitch with the character. In the session, my group was given the two random elements of a grumpy old mole and a high rise welder. We developed the pitch “When a grumpy old mole must convince his unbudging society to build above ground, he learns how to connect with them.” Not plot heavy, and open to creative expansion in many ways.

There are other things to keep in mind. A great story comes from the character finding out not just what they want but what they need (and this goes for antagonists as well as protagonists). Complexity comes from insult being added to injury – and don’t forget to make some element personal.

So in our pitch we can now include:

- a main character changing an attitude or their whole personality
- a clear location for the story
- some opposition or a definite villain
- a catalyst or goal for both hero and villain

My group in this workshop produced this first pitch from the random elements we were given (an elderly mole and a high rise welder). “An elderly mole struggles to convince his family that a deluge is coming and to build above ground”. One way to identify an effective single sentence pitch is to ask: can we communicate this story with a single image? We did.

Now let’s assume we’ve got our green light. Now we can write three acts – just three. These are, as above:

- the set up (Act 1)
- the build (Act 2)
- the payoff (Act 3)

Let’s look at these in the context of a 90 minute movie.
This gives us what's known as a “story spine”

1. Once upon a time … (Act 1)
2. And every day … the inciting incident is at the end of this
3. Until one day … (start of Act 2)
4. Because of that … (Act 2)
5. Because of that … (Act 2)
6. Because of that … (Act 2)
7. Until finally … (Act 3)
8. And since that day … resolution
9. And the moral is … the theme

So three things are happening in our story. These are:

**inner stakes**
- A character arc for our lead
- That character is changing maybe from arrogant to compassionate
- Or from insecure to confident

**outer stakes**
- A catalyst – the inciting incident or meeting
- A plot/goal

and **psychological stakes** the theme

If there are no inner stakes the story will feel shallow. To add depth, there may be two story arcs. For example in Toy Story 1, 60% of the story was the “A” story, of Woody learning to be a team player and not hogging the limelight. But 30% was also the “B” story of Buzz realizing his true identity as a toy, not an actual Space Ranger. And 10% was the other characters also changing in their own ways. Generally the “B” story arc will take place inside the “A” arc:

If the story is of the “dude with a problem” type it needs four additional character elements:

1. A confidante to explain the problem to (along with the audience)
2. A mentor, who provides information and interpretation
3. A family member (usually the father) to say No to a possible solution
4. Allies to rally round and help
Give your main character one passion – no more than one – as well as flaws. However minor characters should be one note to avoid drawing attention away from the main character.

**Closing**
This presentation, with some simplification, is also applicable to short videos and animations. Whenever you see a Pixar movie, review it in your mind later, and see if you can identify these elements.

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