work your idea through the

STORYTELLING SYSTEM

by E.M. Welsh

AN INTRODUCTION

Hi there!

As you may have gathered, I am E.M. or Em or Emma, or anything else you can think of that might further confuse people. But besides confusing people, I am here to help **you** find the best format for your story!

Like many people, I have a genuine love for storytelling - no matter the form - and as I have grown as a person and storyteller, I have found delight in telling my own stories in every type of format around! When I studied in college I took every type of writing class I could get my hands on. I wrote plays, screenplays, short stories, a novel and even a video game script! In every class, everyone shared a genuine love for stories, but I discovered most people felt bogged down to one format, be it because they lacked exposure to other forms or because the idea of trying something new and uncomfortable scared them. **I know it used to scare me.**

So often as writers we have a story in mind and feel constrained to what we think we are "best" at and sacrifice another format that might have produced an overall better piece. It's scary trying something new because it requires so much **time** and **effort** that you don't want to go to waste.

But that's why I'm here and I've made this workbook for you - to push you out of your comfort zone and show you that while you may have strengths in one format, there are some stories that were made to be told in one you are less comfortable with. And that's okay! Together we will power through the scary and the unknown to find the best format for **your story** - not for you. After all, we're here to tell great stories, not to get comfortable.
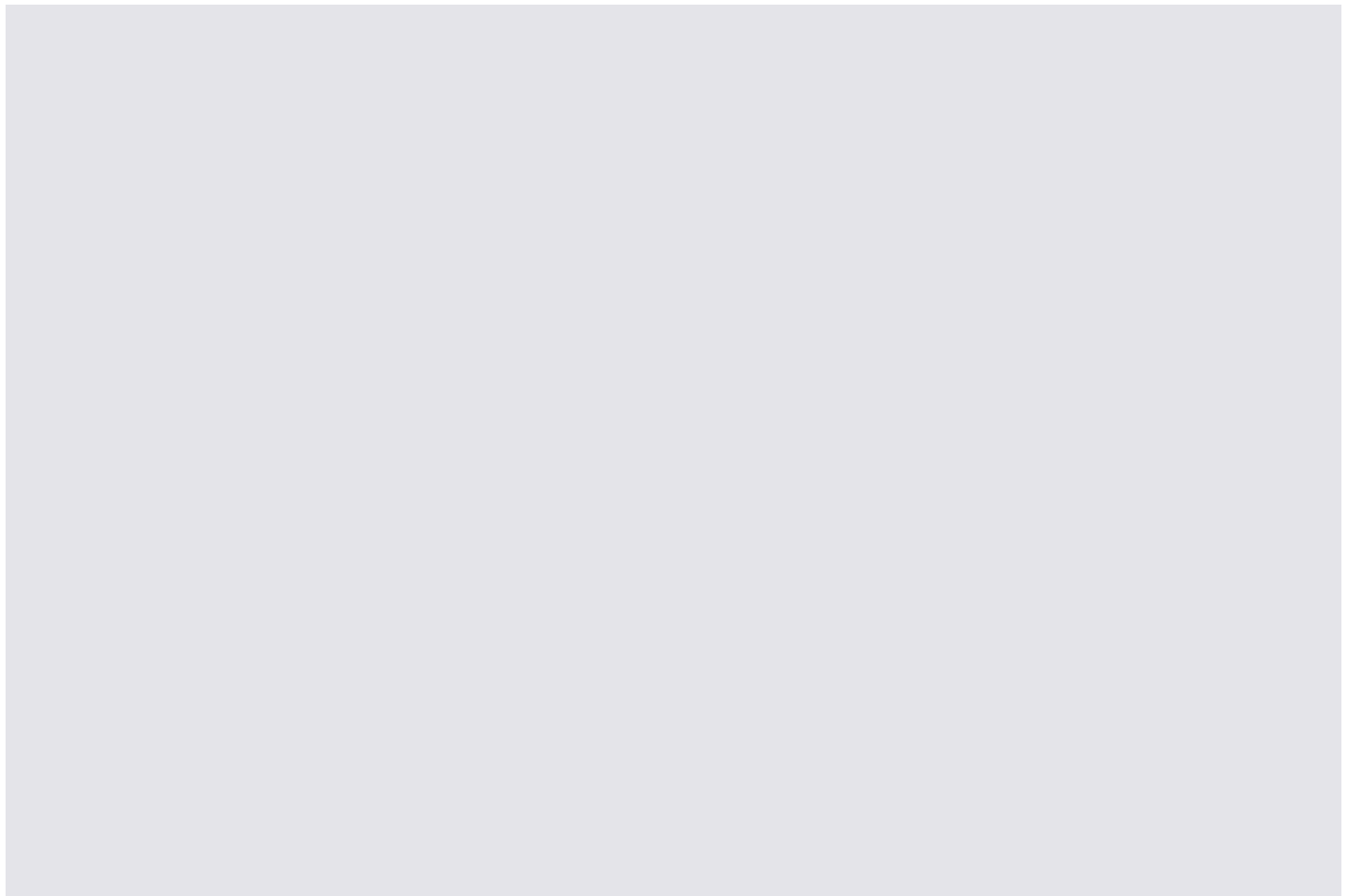
Love,

E.M.

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DEFINE

01. DEFINE

Before one can begin the search for the ideal medium or format to tell their story, they must first decide what that story is in the first place. Perhaps you already have a full-fledged story that you've written out several times only to find yourself completely stuck, or maybe you just have an idea and nothing more. Either will suffice, so long as you have a story in mind that you want to tell. Once you have that figured out, use the space below to explain what your story is. You can do this via pictures, a synopsis or just a list of words explaining what you want your story to be. All that matters is that it embodies your story!

What is your story?

01. DEFINE

Now that you have written down what your story is, it's time to further define it so as to make our work later easier. No matter what format you elect to use, there will always be some sort of structure to your story, even if you are writing a "slice of life" piece or something where nobody changes, there is still a general arc to your story. With that in mind, it's time to divide your story into three key pieces: the **beginning**, the **middle**, and the **end**. Sometimes you'll see these pieces referred to as acts, but for the sake of transparency between all forms we will just refer to them with their more general titles for now.

The Beginning

This is where things first start, providing background information, posing questions, showcasing main themes, as well as introducing the main plot. Perhaps you don't know how to start your story yet - that's why you're here maybe. If that's the case, don't worry. Use the space below to list off what themes you want to cover, characters to introduce or any other information you'll want people to know in the beginning of your piece.

The Middle

Often considered the most tricky part, the middle is actually where the majority of the story happens. If you are short for ideas, try listing off tasks your character will need to do in order to achieve their goal or brainstorm in other ways. It's just important that you have a tangible middle of your story to work with, as it makes up most of every piece. Stories can be without beginnings, but they certainly cannot be without the middle.
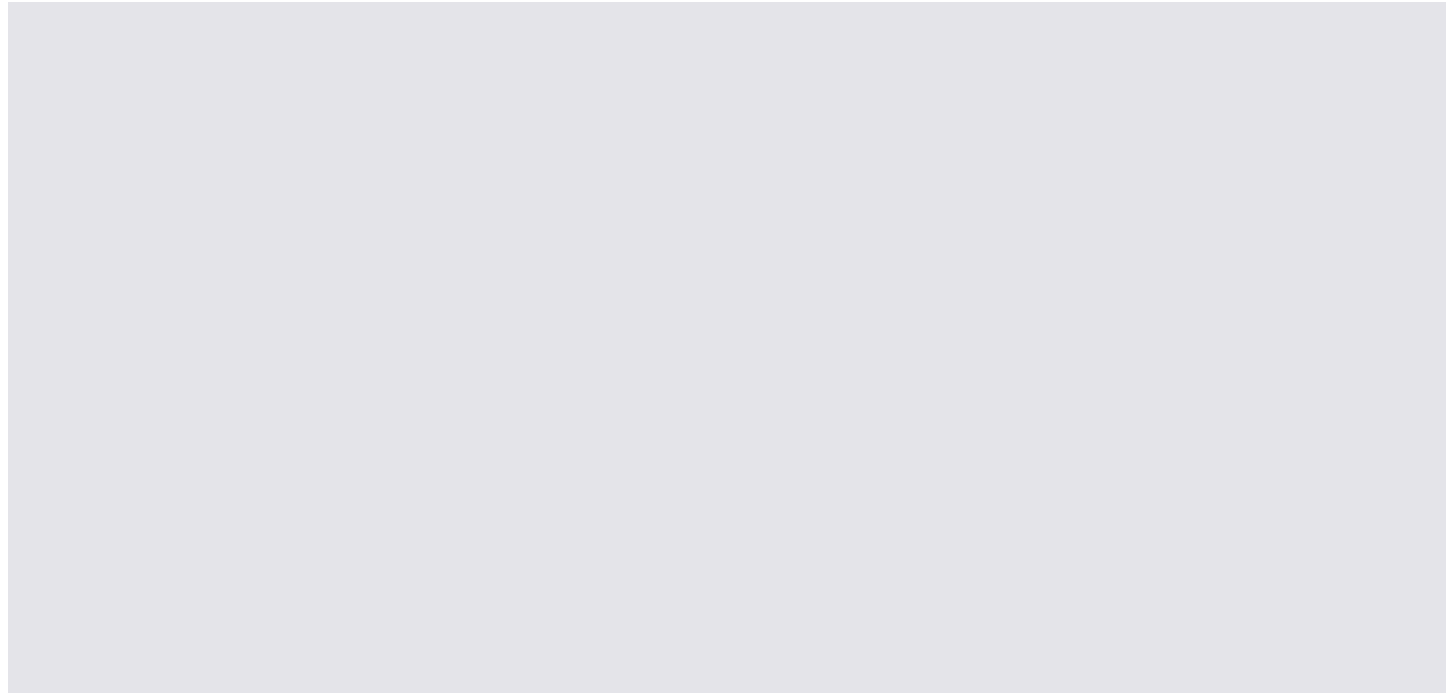
►**AT A LOSS FOR WORDS?** Take a break and look up the synopsis of your favorite story, or better yet, go out and experience the story again yourself. While you experience the story again, take note of all the different things that happen in the middle of the story. How do these things tie into the beginning? Are there new things that emerge in the middle, and if so, why did they emerge in the middle and not in the beginning?

The End

The grand finale, what everyone has been waiting for and the real reason you've been writing - the end. Maybe you haven't figured this part out yet and that's okay. It's more important to know what you are saying with your story, what message you are trying to say or moral you're trying to teach, or if even that trips you up, what mood or feeling you want to evoke, than knowing the exact logistics for your plot. While it may seem like you want to know more going forward about your own story, the truth is it's far more important to know what you want to say when choosing your format.

"STORYTELLING REVEALS MEANING WITHOUT COMMITTING THE ERROR OF DEFINING IT."
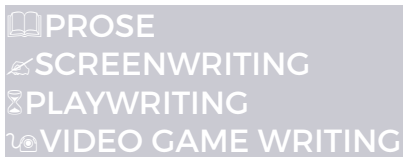
-Hannah Arendt

CHAPTER TWO
LEARN

02. LEARN

Before you can begin to tackle finding the best medium for your story, you must first learn about each individual medium and what they offer for your story that no other medium can.

The main mediums we will be learning about are as follows:

📖PROSE
✍SCREENWRITING
⌛PLAYWRITING
🎮VIDEO GAME WRITING

You'll notice poetry is not included. This is not because I hate poetry. In fact, I LOVE epic poetry and could go on and on about it. I just am opting out of including it because of two reasons:

1) Not all poems are stories with a beginning, middle and end, making it hard to apply the tactics we are using to this form.

2) Poems have so many different formats I could write a whole ebook on that alone.

If you find however that you still wish to use poetry with this book, I highly encourage you to try adapting a favorite poem of yours and interpreting it in various formats.
An example on how to do this can be found in one of my blog posts on how to study a Shakespearean sonnet and learn storytelling from it. There I study how to analyze the poem and learn stories from it, something I believe may be fruitful to my fellow poets.

So before we go forward, let's have a quick definition of each medium we are going to look at with some traditional examples I am going to assume you are either familiar with or have heard of. While these are brief summaries, I highly encourage you take the time to read the accompanying pages which go into more detail about the advantage of each medium.

📖PROSE
Prose is written language in its original form without meter or in our case, formatting rules. However, fellow prose writers know very well that prose can be anything but ordinary, and often the most playful of all the formats.
Examples: *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Catcher in the Rye, The Grapes of Wrath*

✍SCREENWRITING
Screenwriting is the format of writing used as the blueprint for an eventual film. Like the rest of the forms listed after this one, it is not the final product.
Examples: *The Godfather, Pulp Fiction,*

⌛PLAYWRITING
Arguably the oldest form of storytelling, playwriting is made primarily for live performance, though many people read it like literature.
Examples: *Hamlet, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, A Streetcar Named Desire*

🎮VIDEO GAME WRITING
The youngest of all the mediums, video game writing is the blueprint for future video games and often involves a wide range of writing, combining aspects of all the other formats above.
Examples: *Bioshock, The Witcher 3*

PROSE

WHAT IS PROSE?

As defined earlier, prose is written language in the original form, without meter or other formatting restrictions.

It can exist in various storytelling forms, whether it's a novel, short story or even a tiny story. It is incredibly flexible in how it can be used and often incorporated into other storytelling formats. However, more often than not, prose is a type of story that is consumed via *reading*, be it individually or out loud to an audience. Additionally, unlike the other mediums we are studying, when we write prose, we are writing it as the final piece, so in this way prose offers the most **artistic possession** because it is not being passed forward to become a film or a play.

WHY PROSE?

The advantage in electing prose as your medium is first and foremost, as mentioned, the creative control you are granted. While for other mediums you may be the creator of the idea, there still remain other collaborators on the project whose input will shape your story. While of course editors should be taken into account, they are not the same as directors or designers who bring your world to life. For prose, that is your job alone.

Additionally, prose is the most semantically artistic. In prose, every sentence you write is read by someone else. This may seem obvious at first, but when considering how with the other mediums you are writing not only for story but for format, you can appreciate how with prose there is an added pressure of making every sentence meaningful. As a whole, prose writing looks at both the big picture but also all the minute details, and all those details fall on the storyteller.

While to some this may sound fun, to others this sounds absolutely terrifying. Regardless, what's important to note is that prose is a syntactical experience. This is incredibly advantageous with an unreliable narrator, allowing for ample word play and deception where other mediums might have more difficulty. Additionally, there is a lot more room for exploration of ideas or theories because a book or story is not constrained to an allotted time like a movie or play. Furthermore, prose is perhaps the easiest for a storyteller to be **initially artistic**. One can blend the art of poetry into a story to create a very pleasing experience or tell a story with hundreds of narrators or just write a book of short sentences. It's not to say other mediums cannot do this of course, but that prose is perhaps the most freeing of all the mediums for the storyteller because it has almost no restraints or rules.

However, just because that is the case, does not mean all stories are best suited as a novel or short story. In fact, in a world where every book is adapted into a movie these days, there now needs to be something about your story that makes is absolutely necessary to be a book instead of a movie, something that means it cannot exist as a film to the same degree it exists as a book.

02. LEARN

"The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground."
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

To use a more famous and familiar example, this passage from *The Great Gatsby* is often studied in school because of the way it plays with language and the way people read. With the first sentence, readers are led to believe that this may very well be a real person being described, and in fact it is not until a few sentences later that readers realize that what is being described is a billboard.

While you could manipulate the eye visually in a movie or video game, it does not have the same effect as tricking the mind's eye of a reader. Additionally, the syntax in prose allows for the unique experience of ambiguity, something that is much more difficult to achieve in the other mediums because they are visual ones and allow for less interpretation in the mind. Fitzgerald's passage here does that splendidly,

provoking readers to wonder why he might be describing this billboard and what it might mean. Some think it's God, others the rich looking over the poor. Neither are wrong, but because prose is a slow medium, there is a lot of room to sit and speculate. If this same image were in a movie, it would be two seconds long and there would be little time to process it as a statement beyond the story unless one was able to pause the film. It's not to say the other mediums are less "deep" or "artistic," but that because prose is slow and directly involved with the mind, it is easier to communicate in such a way.

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old bray of my heart. I am. I am. I am."
Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

Another example as to what makes prose different can be found in this short excerpt from Sylvia Plath's only novel. A character in a play or movie can take a deep breath. They can say these very words even, but it's not nearly the same as reading Plath's quote to oneself. Because she was a poet, Plath had a strong sense of language even when writing without meter and that is apparent in this quote. While one can play the audio of a heartbeat and get a more realistic sense, nothing does it quite the justice as Plath's play with language when she compares a heartbeat to "I am."

SCREENWRITING

WHAT IS SCREENWRITING?

Screenwriting is the blueprint for a film or TV show and serves as the starting point for the story to be told. While people rarely write screenplays without the intentions of it becoming a film or TV show, there still is an art to writing down the visuals for a movie while maintaining one's voice.

Often a lot changes between the screenplay and the final product. Sometimes it's for the better, and sometimes it's for the worse. The medium is highly collaborative, something that can be very freeing for the storyteller if they can accept that their work is not their own.

WHY SCREENWRITING?

When a storyteller can fill an entire book with as many details as they please without the fear of some director "ruining" their work, it may seem confusing as to why a story might be better suited for film over literature. As mentioned, there are no constraints to literature whereas screenwriting is ridden with them. Yet if that is the case, why are so many books easily adapted into films?

The truth is, screenwriting gets to the **core of storytelling**. Maybe you've heard the phrase "There's beauty in simplicity," When a storyteller gets down to writing a screenplay, they often have to cut back a lot of flourishes for the sake of time. But this in turn forces them to tell a great story without using other means to "cheat," Additionally, this format also encourages storytellers to

think visually, a muscle many prose writers likely do not stretch.

Think of Eisenstein, the pioneer of the montage. He believed that by showing an image of a human face and then something else like a swan or a knife right afterwards, viewers would report different emotions in the face. He was a juxtaposer of images, understanding that each one stands as a symbol. Because prose is a much slower medium, it is hard to rely on human intuition to the same extent in a story. Instead, screenwriters and storytellers of film must convey incredibly deep things in a short amount of time, even it's just determining where characters stand in the frame.

Furthermore, films can easily be experienced by a group and are often seen as a communal activities. In fact, have you ever watched a film on silent or a foreign film without subtitles? While you may have not been able to pick out minute details in the plot, there's a good chance you under-stood the general arc of the story or at the very least how someone was feeling.

Film is where the writer becomes a photographer and the photographer a writer. It's a place for visuals, for fantasies to become so real had we not known better, we'd have sworn they were from our own reality. There's a reason people talking about the "magic" of movie making. And there's a reason that word still to this is only attributed to that format.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
Charlie Kaufman

If you are familiar with this film at all, you will know that it is a wonderful piece that could only ever exist as a film. And that's what makes it so perfect for this example. Charlie Kaufman is one of the few *screenwriting* auteurs in the film business, making his scripts a perfect source for examples.

What makes Eternal Sunshine only tellable as a film is the visualizations. While the story is non-linear, many books do this and do it quite well. But when choosing to do either a film or book, it breaks down to visuals, because that is the prime differentiator.

Kauffman puts those to use as a writer in a few ways. He uses Clementine's change of hair color to tell the viewer what point in time we are in, something that would feel more clunky in a novel and truthfully a bit forced. Additionally, the memory sequences where Clementine and Joel sit in their living room while it rains on them or play in the kitchen sink are incredibly effective at making the audience feel like they are running through a series of memories.

Birdman
Alejandro G. Iñárritu (and others)

The "gimmick" behind this film being that it was all shot to look like one continuous shot already makes this piece a prime example for screenwriting. The continuous shot is the equivalent to a book having no paragraphs or chapter breaks, so that the story of Birdman would not be communicated as effectively in literature nor be as impressive on stage where something like that is already common.

The Social Network
Aaron Sorkin

Perhaps the only other screenwriting auteur is Sorkin. Unlike Kauffman, Sorkin writes very traditional scripts, mostly about things that could technically exist as a book. However, because he's the master of dialogue, screenwriting could not be more perfect for his stories. *The Social Network* works for film not only because of this dialogue though, but because the style of the story would be far less interesting in a novel. After all, it already exists as a nonfiction piece of work, yet the dramatization behind this story make it ideal for a film narrative.

Unless you are writing an anthology series like *True Detective* or *Stranger Things*, the criteria for an idea that will succeed as a TV series is very different than that of a movie or anthology. There is no beginning, middle, and end, so for the sake of avoiding confusion it is not featured in these examples.

PLAYWRITING

WHAT IS PLAYWRITING?

Playwriting is the storytelling format meant to be performed by actors in a theater. There is a high emphasis on dialogue and character, due in part to the constraints of the stage.

The format is much like screenwriting, but also very different from it. However, unlike screenplays, plays are often written without the immediate intent on being carried out into production and often people even read them like one might read a book.

WHY PLAYWRITING?

Plays being an older format have earned the formatting flexibility that screenplays have not. Perhaps this is because plays require more suspension of disbelief than a movie does - even a high budget play cannot make it look a real dragon is soaring over the characters' heads - or perhaps this is because plays stand as a mix between prose and screenwriting, allowing for more creativity with stage directions and whatnot.

In addition to the formatting flexibility and emphasis on dialogue, what playwriting offers that no other medium can is the live experience. For each play's performance stands on its own, the story in direct communication with its consumers and often the feedback of said consumers influencing how the actors on stage perform. In that way then it is perhaps the most **direct form of storytelling** and dates back to the oldest way we used to tell stories: orally.

However, just like books, plays have almost all been adapted into a movie at one point or another. So the justification for your story to be better suited to being a play over a film should ideally tie to the audience experience and craftsmanship with the set pieces. More specifically, using the setting of a stage to your creative advantage.

For instance, black box theater requires audience members to use their imagination far more than Broadway theater would. But both plays use the stage in such a way that to perform it for film would be an entirely different experience. In fact, experimental theater is hardly reproducible and musical theater often falls short because in musical films the songs slow down and are often cut because they do not "contribute" to the story to the same extent, whereas a musical on stage performs everything faster, giving them more time to explore other aspects of the story.

Additionally, if you have a story in mind that is focused on character and dialogue with little emphasis on visuals, playwriting might be a place to take such story. But in general, when deciding between the two mediums of screenwriting or playwriting, it ultimately comes down to **style**. While both offer a communal experience, the live performance of a play cannot be brought home and watched on one's laptop. Yet conversely, a film can bring any idea to life and use more artistic, photographic visuals to tell a story. It all comes down to your choice and vision.

02. LEARN

EXAMPLES OF PLAYWRITING

"To be or not to be?"
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Perhaps the most obvious of all the playwrights is the Bard himself. While any of his plays could be used as an example, *Hamlet* is one of the most well-known. Because the language of Shakespeare is so old, many people believe his work is best experienced when performed live with the correct pronunciation. Others simply argue that the plays were *written* to be performed, making them difficult to study by just reading like one might read a book.

While these claims may be true, it is tricky because a lot of Shakespeare's plays are written in meter, blurring the lines between playwriting and poetry. So to avoid further confusion, it is best to focus on what about Shakespeare's original works make them so ideal for on stage performance instead of via film.

The most obvious point is that in what other world can a character talk to themselves as much as those in a play? In any other medium there is so much happening that consumers of the story grow impatient with soliloquies, yet in a play there is far less trying to steal away the audience's attention, allowing for more patience and appreciation of the monologue, something Shakespeare nails in *Hamlet*.

Furthermore, plays focus first and foremost on character. Shakespeare was a master at creating complex characters and exploring them the same way humans do - via conversation. As a result, he's demonstrated with all his works just how good plays are at getting to the core of character. His work avoids distractions, and just like screenwriting gets to the core of storytelling and plot, so playwriting gets to the core of character exploration. And every one of the Bard's plays is a testament to that.

"What are you doing out of your grave? *(Beat)* What are you doing out of your grave? *(Beat)* Speak to me. *(We hear the sound of someone being slapped, but MORSE remains still and does not react)*"
Naomi Wallace, *One Flea Spare*

The majority of *One Flea Spare* takes place in an abandoned house during a plague. While the play could technically be adapted into a film - nearly everything can these days - there is something eerie and unique to the play being on a dark and nearly empty stage. Take for example this opening monologue by the character Morse. Her words are creepy and unsettling, yet what takes that even further is the way the sound of slapping plays with the performance. Is it an artistic choice that she does not react? Or is it a memory? Were this scene in a film, audience members would hear the sound as a memory in the character's mind, but in a play its use stands to be more ambiguous. It is in this way that storytellers can play with meaning and style where they cannot in film.

VIDEO GAME WRITING

WHAT IS VIDEO GAME WRITING?

While there is no official format for video game writing as it varies from studio to studio, the medium essentially serves to write the story in the best way possible for game designers.

Often there is a lot of branching dialogue for choice-based games, making it appear like a much more complex screenplay. Whereas other times there is more prose involved such as in diary entries or glossaries. It is the youngest of all the story-telling mediums thus far, and as of yet still has not earned enough renown to be considered "art."

WHY VIDEO GAME WRITING?

The number one differentiator between video game writing and all the other forms listed is the **introduction of the player**. In no other medium can you find consumers of the story talking about the story as if it were their own. Yet with video games, the player is also the main character, and so their perspective is much more involved.

Players shape the outcome of the story for most video games and even if they don't, they certainly feel like they do. As a result, video games get to do something that most stories don't, which is to try out all the possibilities for the story and see which is best. That in turn leads to a wide user experience in which each gamer plays the story slightly different, even if it is not a choice-based game. In a way this is much like playwriting in that the story can never be experienced the same way twice, but

also quite different because a video game is often personal and played alone, whereas a play is (hopefully) watched by a large audience.

However, while video gaming can be communal, with story-based games, the experience between someone playing the narrative out versus the person just watching someone play is entirely different and for the latter usually not nearly as immersive or engaging. In this way it differs greatly from films or plays because though the game can be watched as a group, only the person playing the character experiences it like a gamer.

Another aspect of the player that differentiates from the spectator is the pure sense of exploration and decisiveness to stray from the path of the story whenever one chooses. Not all games allow for this, but most do make room for some ambling about, something people rarely have patience for in any other format. With that there is also the power for the player to choose what subplots and storylines bore or excite them. From there they even determine whether they want to continue on the main path of the story and come back for the side adventures later, or do them then and there. Despite the ability to personalize and experience a story in an entirely new way, many people assume they must have specifics skills to enjoy video gaming and often write off the medium altogether as a result. However, this couldn't be further from the truth, especially as gaming evolves.

02. LEARN

Bioshock
Ken Levine

Perhaps the *only* video game writing auteur, Ken Levine was highly influenced by the works of Ayn Rand, specifically *Atlas Shrugged* when writing *Bioshock*, something that brought a lot of newfound respect to the medium.

While it is not a choice-based game, half of the story in *Bioshock* is the creepy sensation of exploring Rapture. While the story itself could exist in a book or movie, it would likely fall flat because part of what makes the story so great is the idea that the player is the main character experiencing this underwater city. While a lengthy paragraph or two might do this justice, video games scratch that itch in storytellers to be able to see and *touch* that world. Furthermore, without giving away too much, the ending of this game utilizes the player mentality perfectly so that if the story were in any other format the twist would not be nearly as shocking.

The Witcher 3
Marcin Blacha & Mateusz Tomaszkiewicz

Based on the book series by Andrzej Sapkowski, *The Witcher 3* takes eveything fantasy fans already love, then gives them more of it. A traditional RPG game, the *Witcher 3* takes the player experience in a choice based game to an entire new level. With most games like this, you say things in conversation that shape your personality and eventually shape the game's story. But this game takes it even further with so many interesting side-quests that player cannot help but follow, many of which determine either the grand picture of the story, or just influence little flourishes.

The game is massive and pays an incredible amount of attention to detail, offering a wonderful example as to how choice-based games turn the player into a part of the story and not just a spectator of it.

The Stanley Parable
Davey Wreden &William Pugh

An independent game, *The Stanley Parable* has around 18 different endings, demonstrating what "choose-your-own-adventure novels" never could. The game is quick, the story changing based on whether you take a left turn or a right turn, making it an easier story to navigate the branching dialogue system.

Unlike the other two games, there is also no batte or combat involved, making it ideal to demonstrate the mechanics video games offer for storytelling alone. As a result, those who feel they lack the "skills" for video games should not feel initimidated by this comedic adventure.

CHAPTER THREE
CHALLENGE

03. CHALLENGE

Embracing the Challenge

At this point you should have a general grasp as to what each medium does and what advantages and disadvantages there are to writing in each. While of course you may not be an expert at them just yet, we are now going to practice imagining your story in every format, making it as realized as possible.

If you are unfamiliar with how to write the different mediums, don't fret. Each exercise is written under the assumption that the medium is new to you and will guide you through the process as such. What's important is that you use your imagination to take your story to places you ordinarily wouldn't when in your comfort zone.

Now, before you dive into the process of challenging both yourself and your story, I suggest you use either the space below or a separate sheet of paper to copy down your story's beginning, middle and end from before so as to keep it close by.

BEGINNING	
MIDDLE	
END	
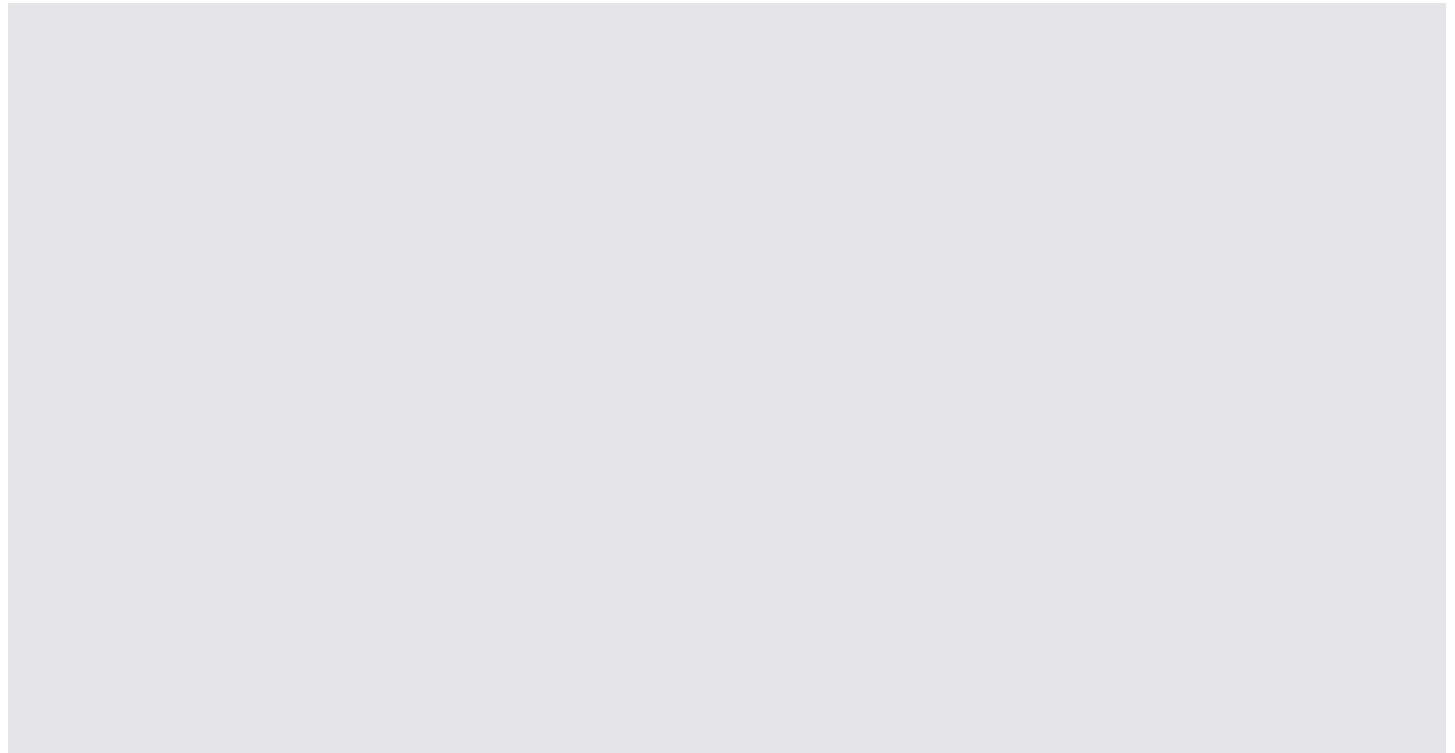
PROSE

Just as before, we will begin with prose. Even if you claim that you have no experience with prose and are not a "gifted writer," you still use prose nearly everyday, though perhaps not as beautifully as you would like. But this is not an exercise to write beautifully. Nobody writes like that until many revisions have been made. This is instead an exercise in thinking about your story as a novel or short story.

More than likely, this is where you first began with your idea. When people think of writers, they usually imagine the novelists and poets and forget the rest. Sometimes the playwrights make it in there, but the other two are often long forgotten. As a result, ideas are you usually considered first as books for most writers because it's the avenue we were taught to follow. And that's okay. We just need to get that way of thinking onto the paper and out of our heads first and foremost.

We will begin the exercise by asking ourselves:

"What does my story look like as a novel?"

It's a seemingly simple question - at first. Use the space below to answer it as best you can.
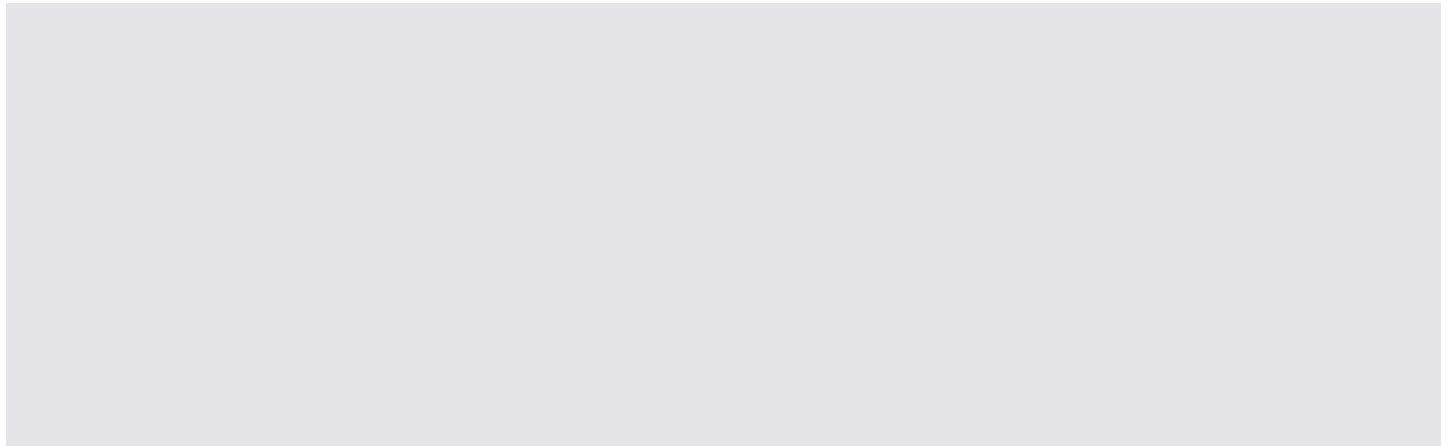
03. CHALLENGE

Maybe after writing that out, your story looks exactly as it did before. Thinking about the specifics of a medium and what it brings to your story is something difficult to get used to. But the general objective here is to try and tell a version of our story that **can only be told in that medium.** Is that always possible? No. Do people often write things with the intentions of it being adapted later? Yes, absolutely. But for the sake of practice, we are going to try our very best to imagine what makes our stories unique in each medium.
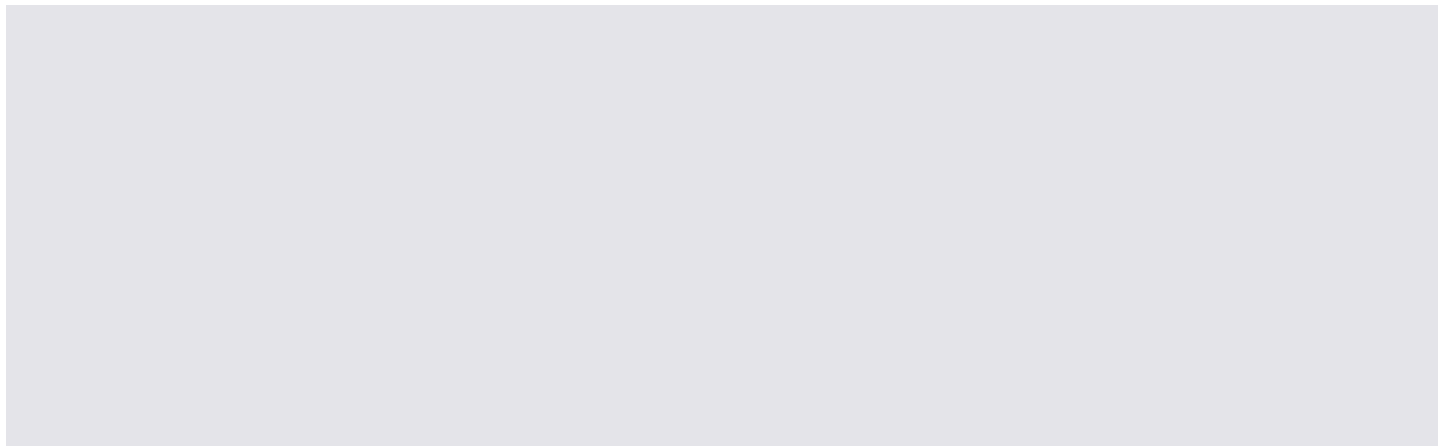
So with that in mind as well as what we read about prose earlier, let's dive deeper into what about turning your story into a novel or short story would make it unique. Try to go through all the questions without stopping, though feel free to reread parts in chapter two if you get stuck.

What is a perspective you can only demonstrate in prose from your story?
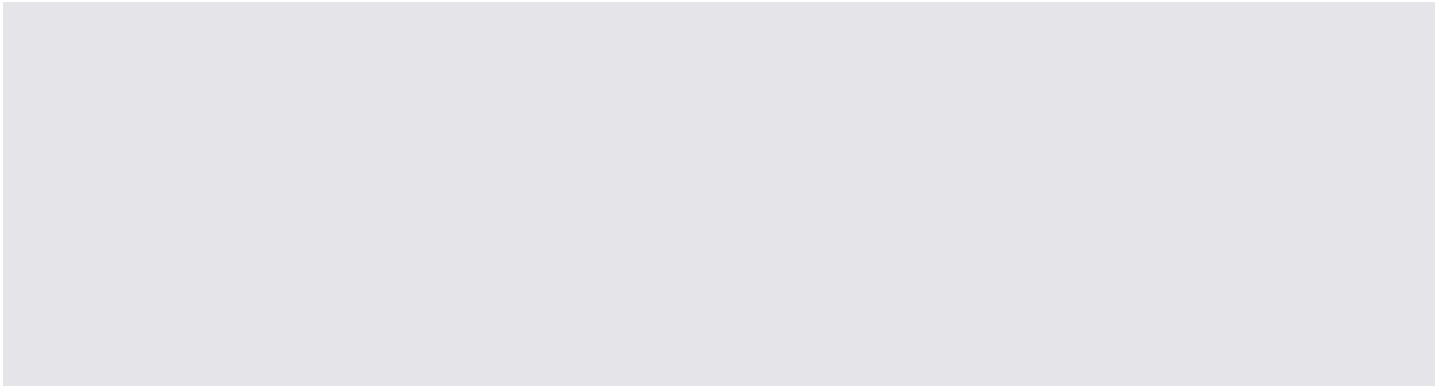
What insights can we gain from reading the story to ourselves?
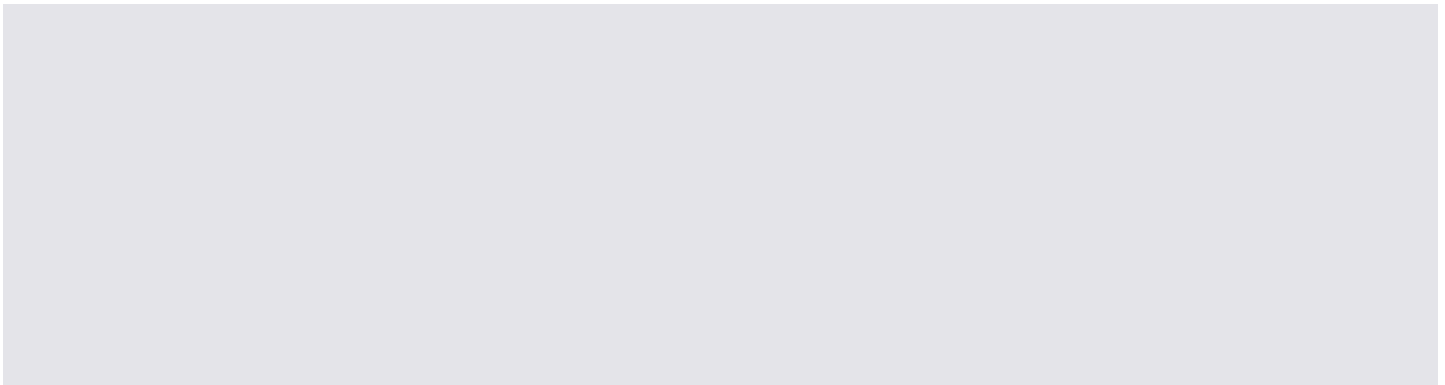
03. CHALLENGE
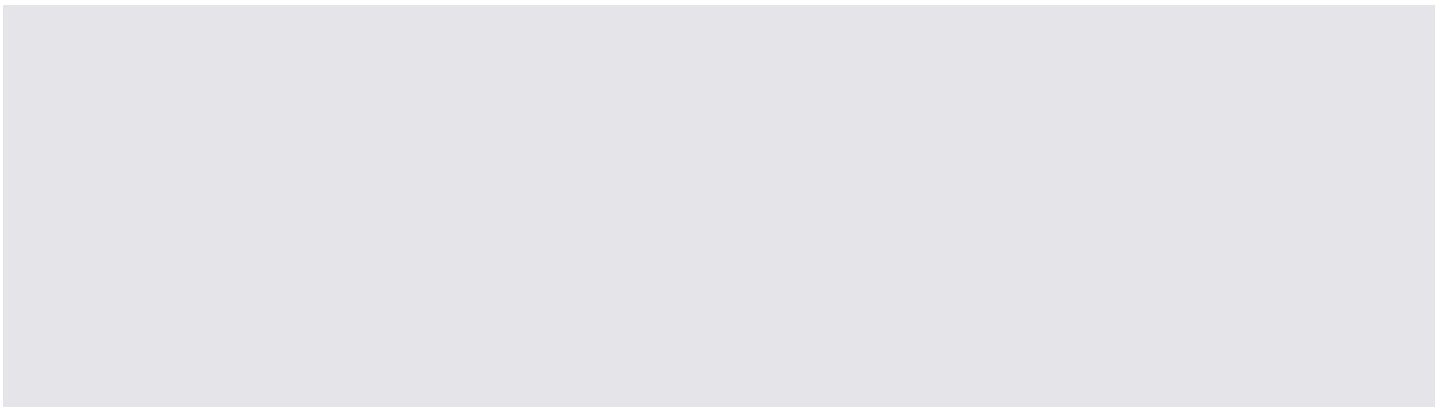
What are things in your story you can describe that no image or sound can encapsulate?

What are some images or ideas you can spend time talking about that relate to your story?
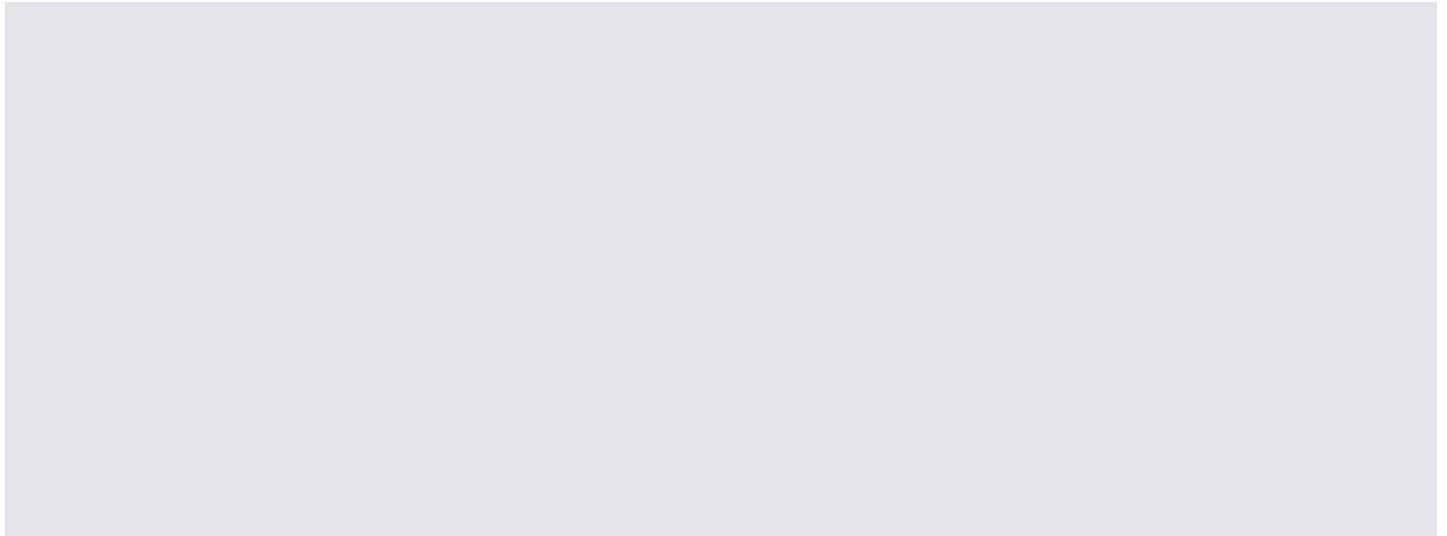
What is a way you can play with the narration and who is narrating? Remember, even third-person narrators have a voice.
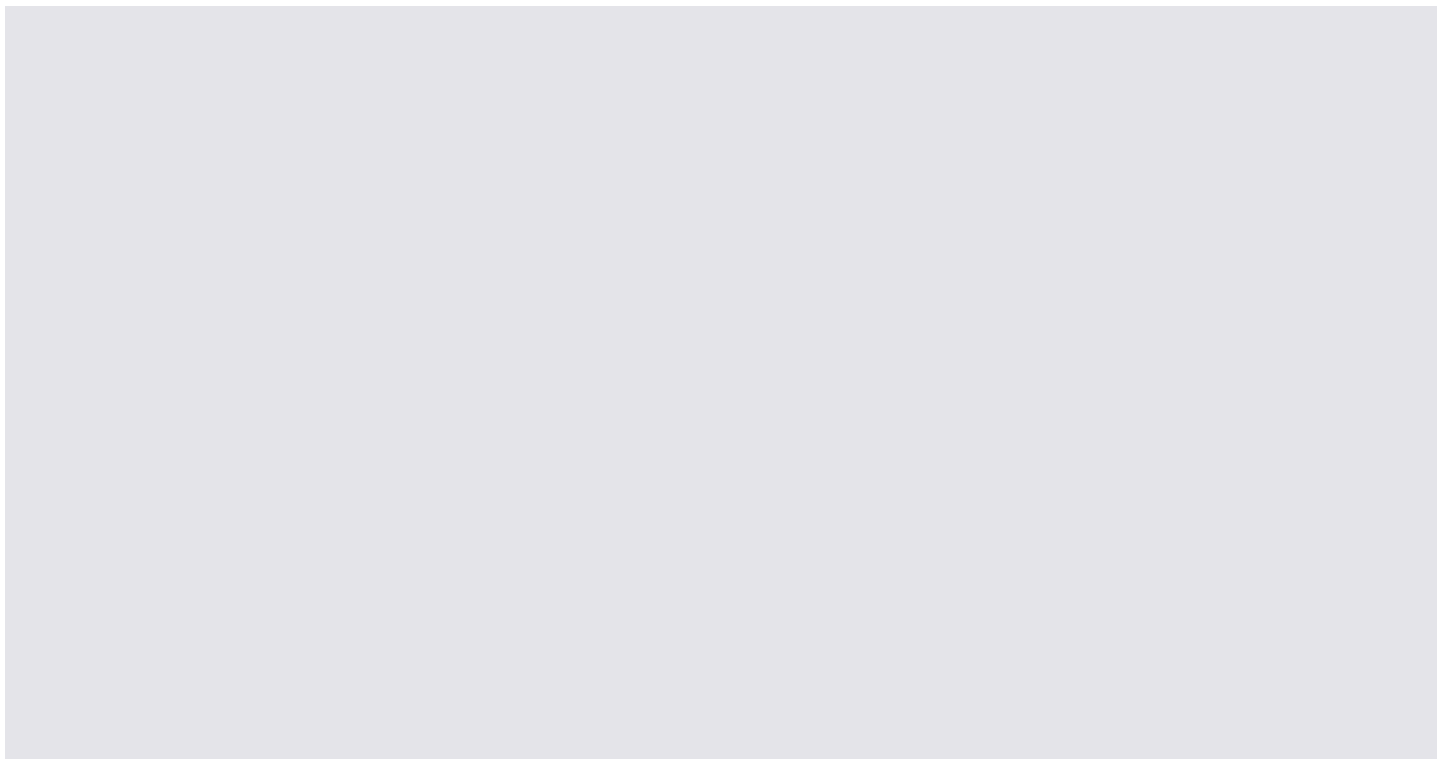
03. CHALLENGE

What are some new subplots or side characters you can introduce without worrying about the length of your story?

What are some big picture ideas or motifs you have that you can express in small sentences or words?
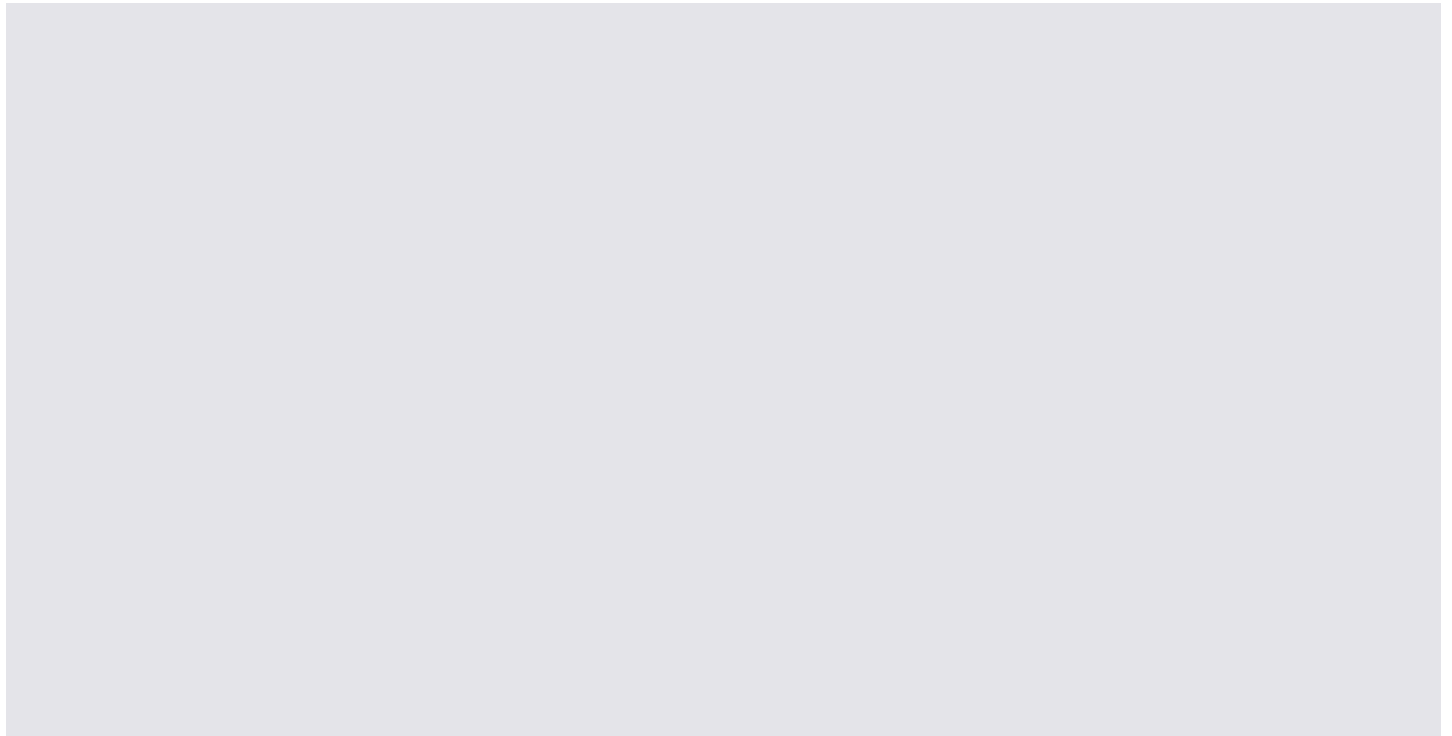
03. CHALLENGE

Now that you've considered all of the above questions, ask yourself one more time:

"What does my story look like as a novel?"

Does the story look different this time? If so, write it down!

If not, it seems as if you've had a novel idea this whole time. And that's great! Now to challenge that idea into becoming a screenplay, a play and a video game!

> "The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid"
>
> *–Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey*

03. CHALLENGE

SCREENWRITING

Now that we've gotten prose out of our system, it is time to move on to the most "limiting" of the mediums - screenwriting. However, maybe you've heard fellow artists describe how freeing limitations are. Perhaps it's because with said limitations, storytellers are forced into a place they are not used to and must creatively work their way around these limitations to tell their story. It's much like how the hero when trapped in a life-threatening situation always finds a crafty way to escape so that had there been no limitations or things getting in her way all along, she might not have found the solution.

As a result of these limitations, writers and directors have done some highly creative work in film that no amount of prose can give life to. Think upon Terrence Malick's work, a director's whose films gives meaning to the term "moving pictures" and makes it "moving art." Or perhaps Charlie Kaufman who was mentioned earlier, known for using visual queues to keep his zany world in check. No matter who you use as inspiration though, it's important to remember that if you're not used to thinking visually and like a screenwriter, it won't come naturally - at first. The more you practice this system of thinking though, the easier it'll become. So, like with prose, let's ask ourselves the same question we did before:

"What does my story look like as a screenplay?"
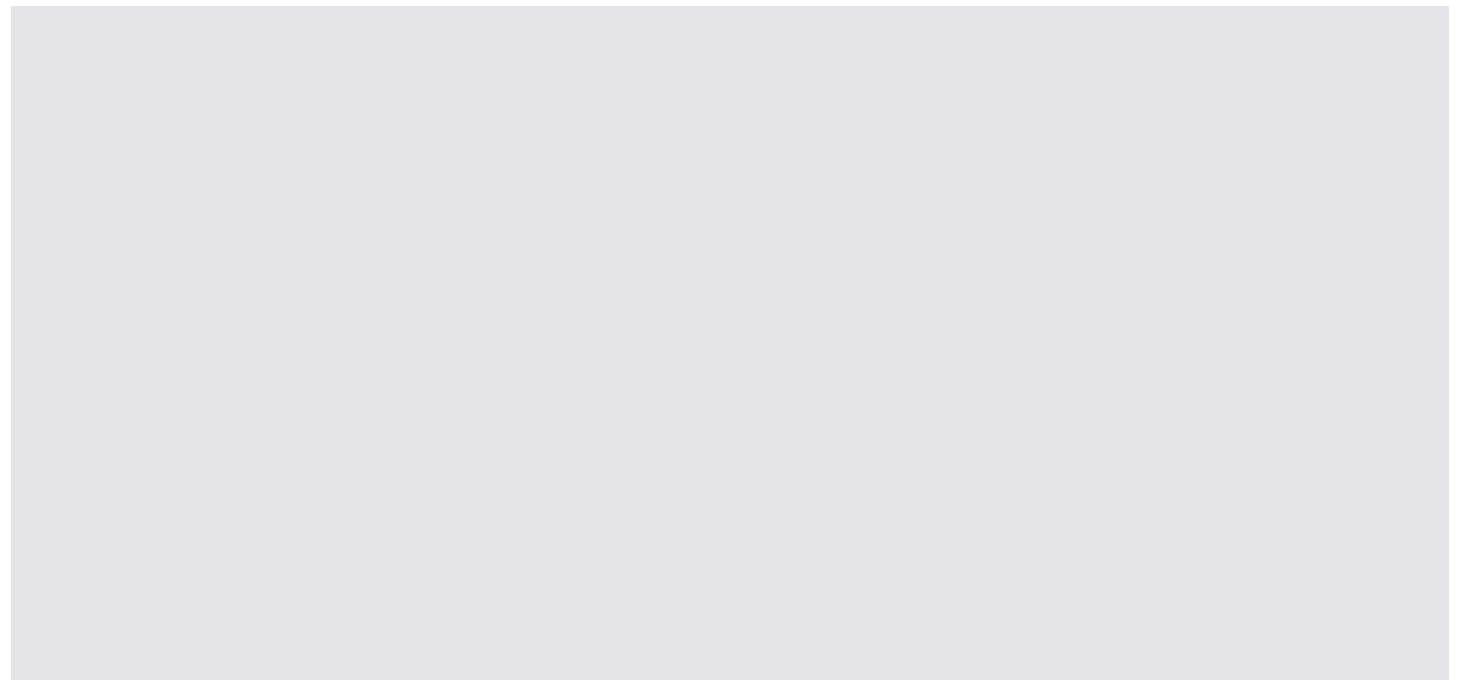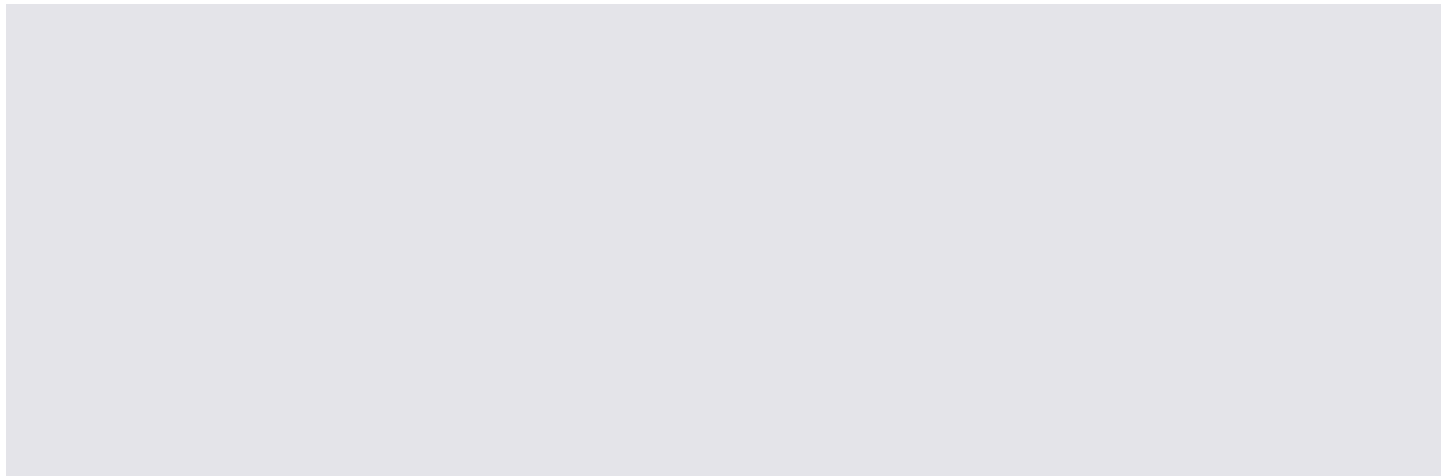
03. CHALLENGE

More than likely you imagined the screenplay version of your story to be a trimmed down version of your novel. In many cases, that is exactly what it is. But as you'll remember, we're trying to treat this story as if you had always imagined it to be a screenplay and nothing else, so we want to shape it so that it has elements to it that make it perfect for screenwriting and no other medium.
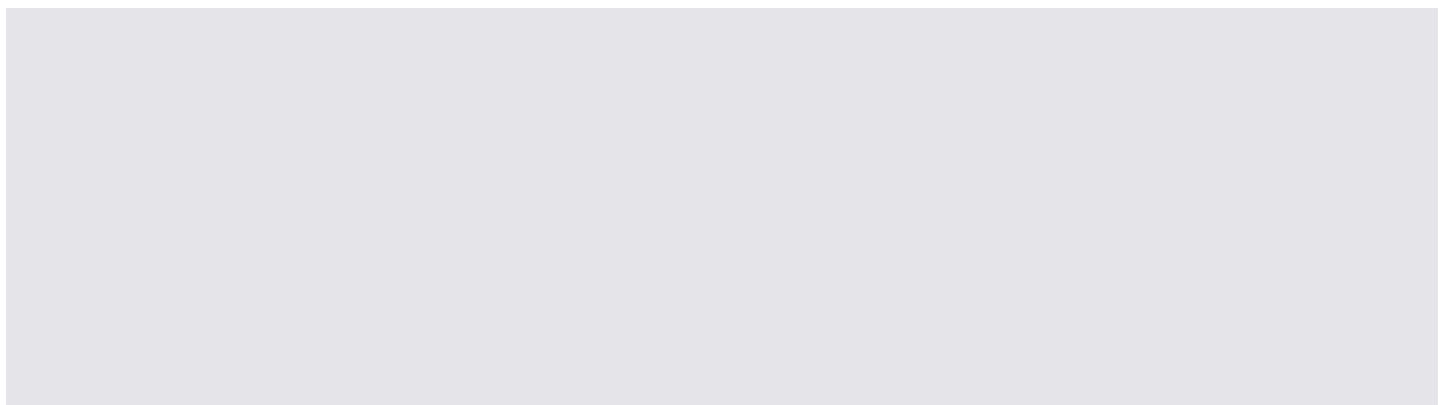
More than anything, that means thinking visually. While the script and story may be constrained to an allotted time, the visualizations are not. Unlike with prose where readers must imagine your world, here you are able to make it come to life! So try your best to take those images you see when you write your ideas down and make them as real and tangible as possible. Because who knows, maybe someday they will be!

What does your story look like without all its flourishes?
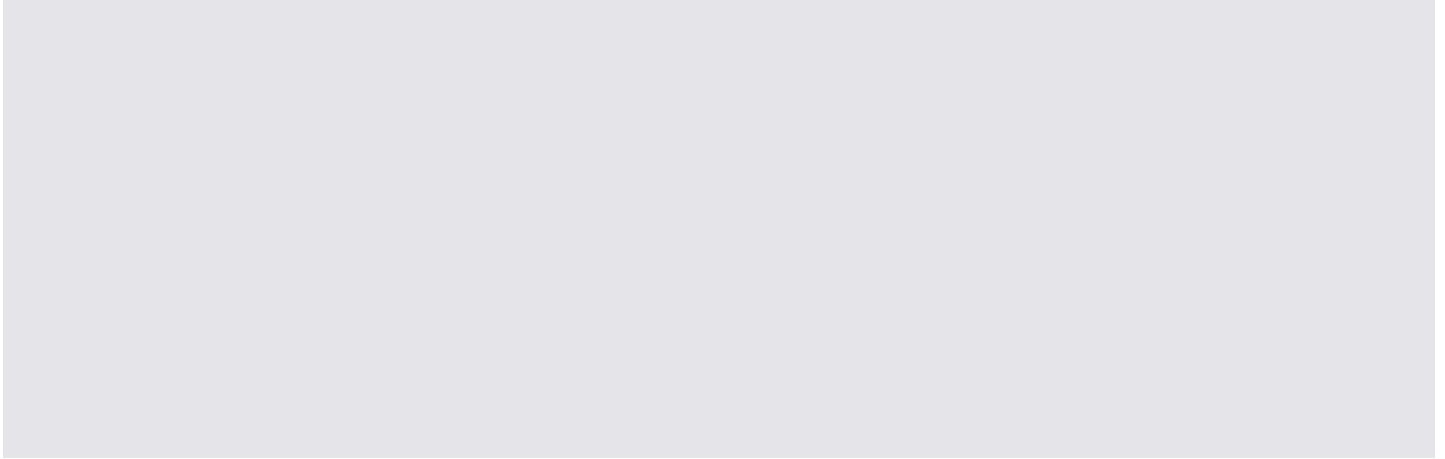
What are some flourishes that are essential to the story's theme or style?
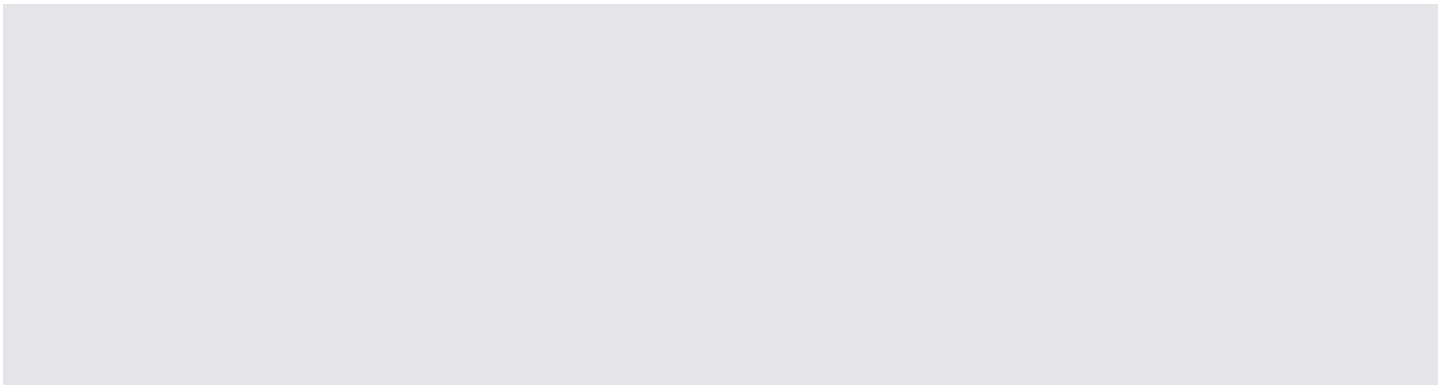
03. CHALLENGE
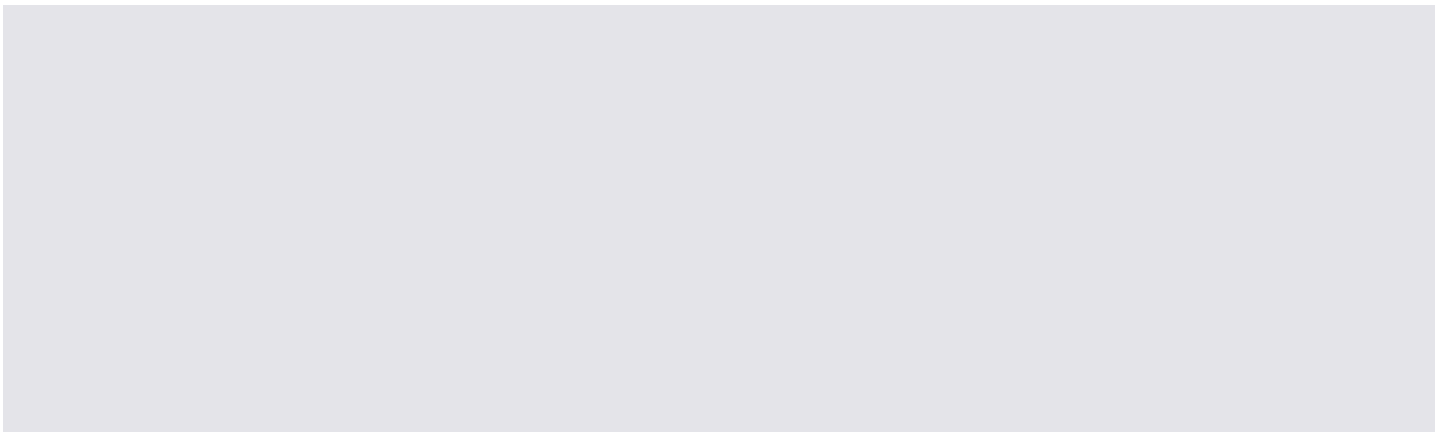
What does your story look like without dialogue?

On the contrary, what would happen if you added more dialogue to your story?
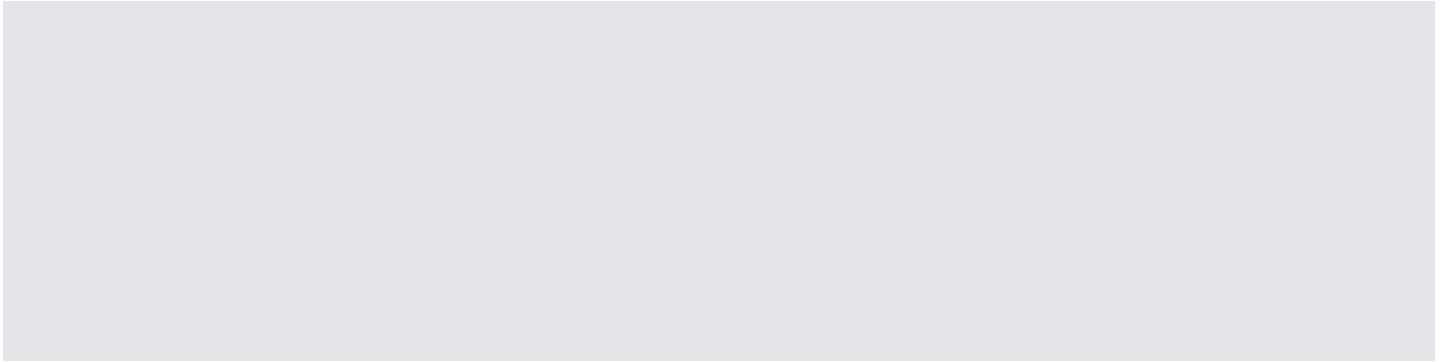
What are the colors of your story?
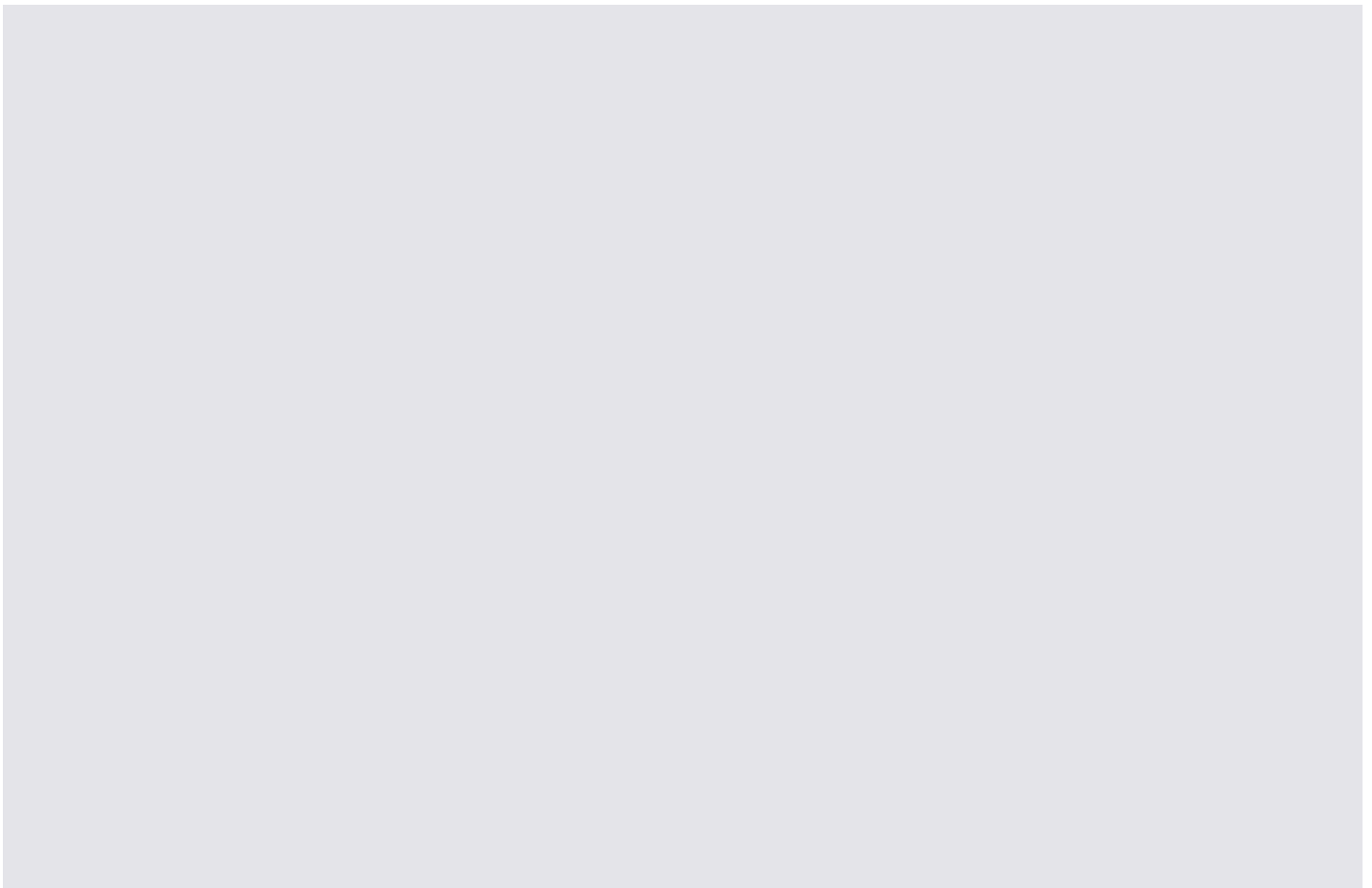
What are the sounds and music to your story?

If you had to tell your story in ten still images, what would each image look like? How would you arrange the order? What would messing up the order do to your story?
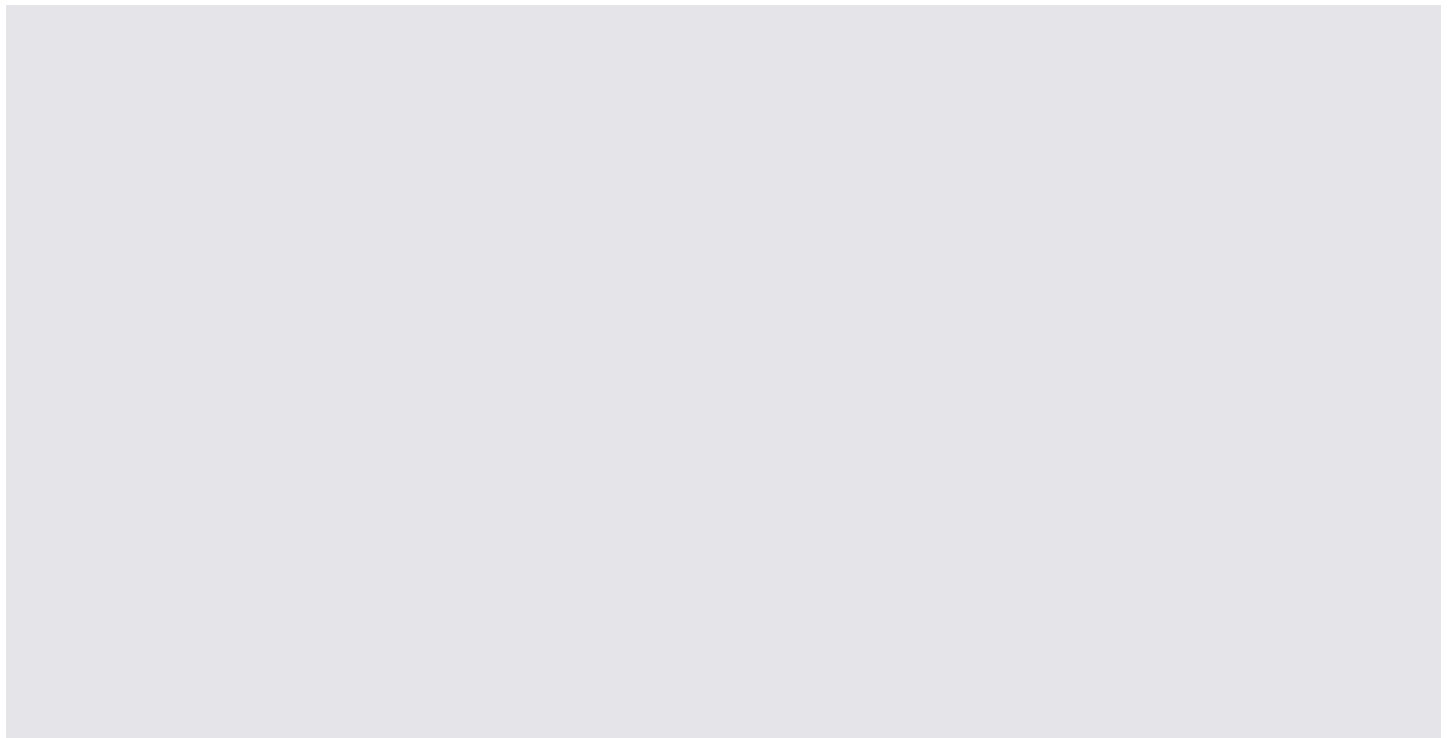
03. CHALLENGE

And now we're here again! So...

"What does my story look like as a screenplay?"

In what ways is it different from your prose version of the story? Can you make it even more different?

Do your two stories look the same? Try working through the exercises again and try to make them as separate as possible! Don't worry. This isn't your final story - it's just practice!

> "The only responsibility of the script is to produce the best possible film. Those who think it must be 'faithful' seem to treat adaptation like marriage. Fans of some sources, like a comic book or a TV series, will be outraged by any changes, but adaptation can also mean improvement."
>
> *–Roger Ebert*

PLAYWRITING

By now you should start getting familiar with the process of questioning your own story idea. You may be fatigued and worn out from this, and if you need to take a break, by all means do, but I encourage you to finish out challenging your story even if you are **100%** already sure you want it to be a book or a movie.

Why?

Because even though you may feel like you know how your story should be told, you have not seen it as a play or video game yet! For all you know, that could be the sweet spot your story was meant to be told in. "But what if it's not?" You may be wondering. Isn't this a waste of time then? Shouldn't you be already working on plotting out your story and maybe even be writing it by now? No. Because while you may be right about what your story should be, there is always something you can steal from the other mediums to make your own story unique. For instance if you love how theater actors talk to the audience and make things "meta" you may realize you'd like to do the same for your book! But you can't realize that until you see your story as a play! So even though you may be worn out, push onward and ask yourself:

"What does my story look like as a play?"
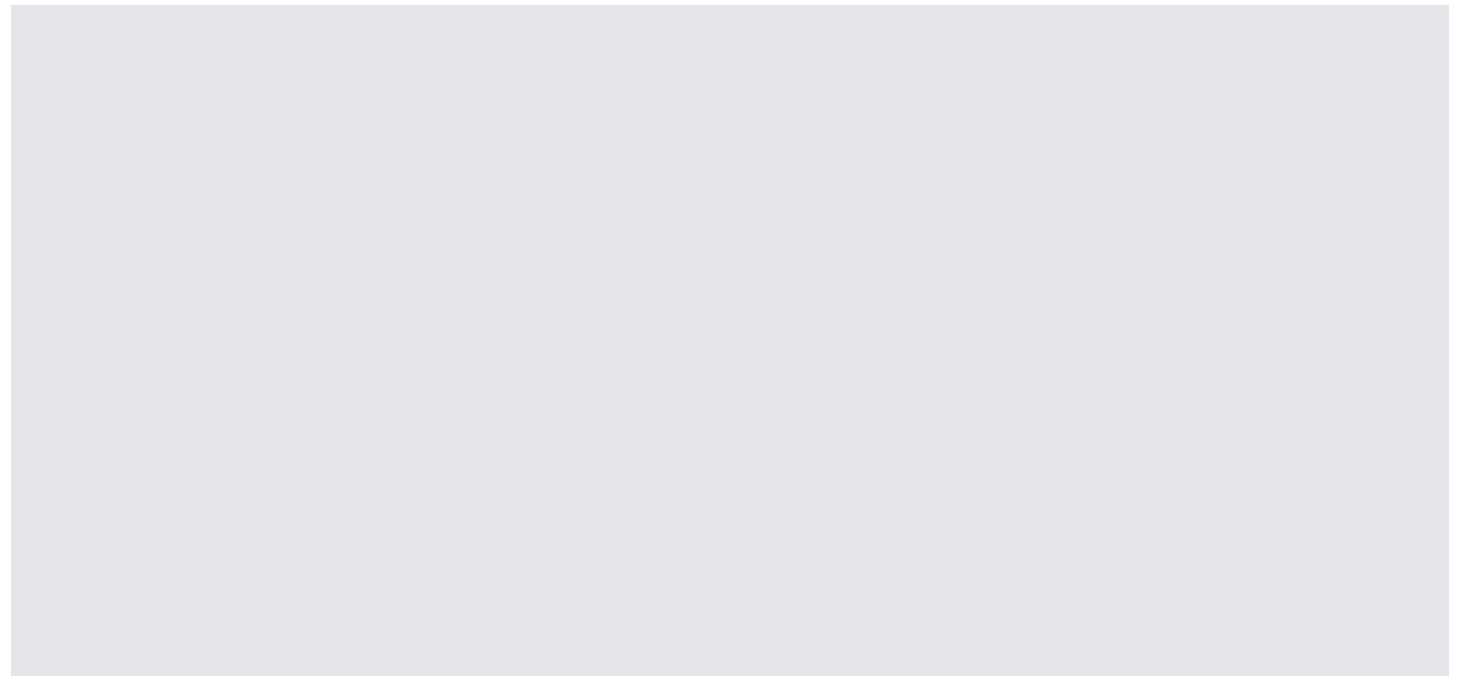
03. CHALLENGE

The trickiest part about playwriting versus screenwriting is how similar the two can be. Because both involve an audience sitting together for a certain amount of time, they both can be easily adapted into each other because the show time is usually the same amount for both. However, if you've seen adaptations of either the film or the play into the other form, you'll notice they still remain unique. Films are more finalized, more perfect in their execution because they can hide the errors, whereas plays are loose and involve a human connection, though that often means there are more exhibitions of errors, although sometimes for the best. By highlighting those differences, you can see which is better for your story.
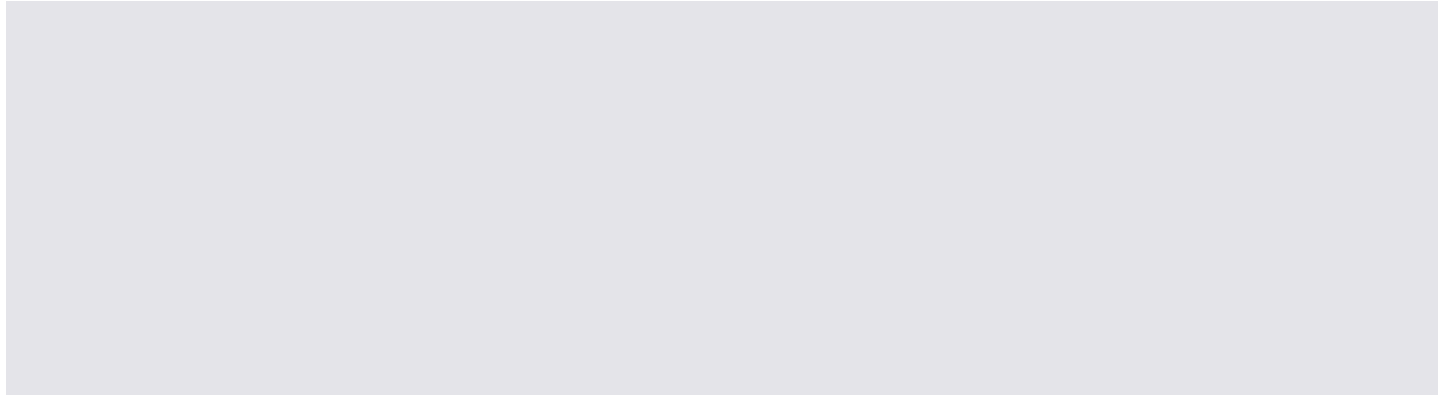
What would happen if you opened up your characters' minds and let them talk longer than they should?

How would the audience's reaction shape the way your story unfolds? How can your story play with this communication?
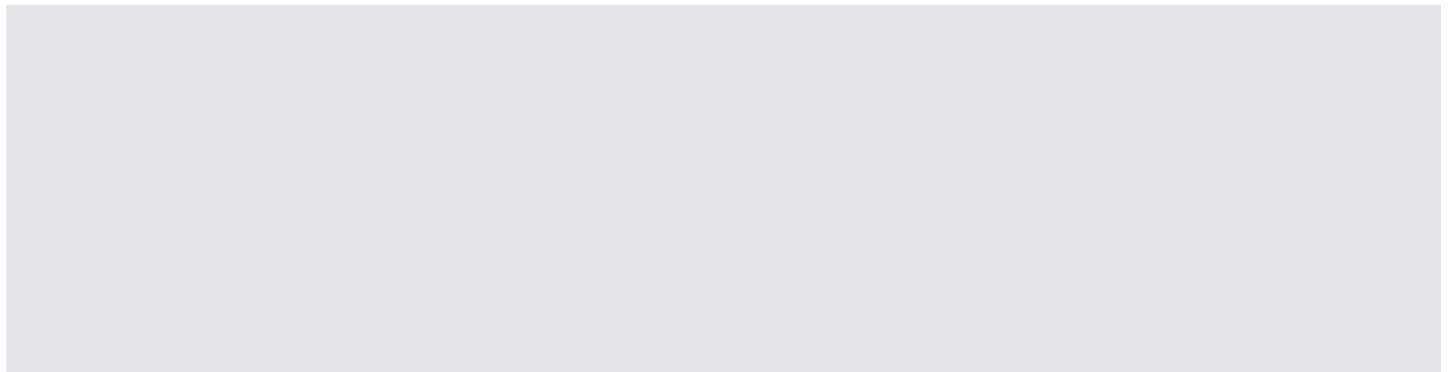
03. CHALLENGE
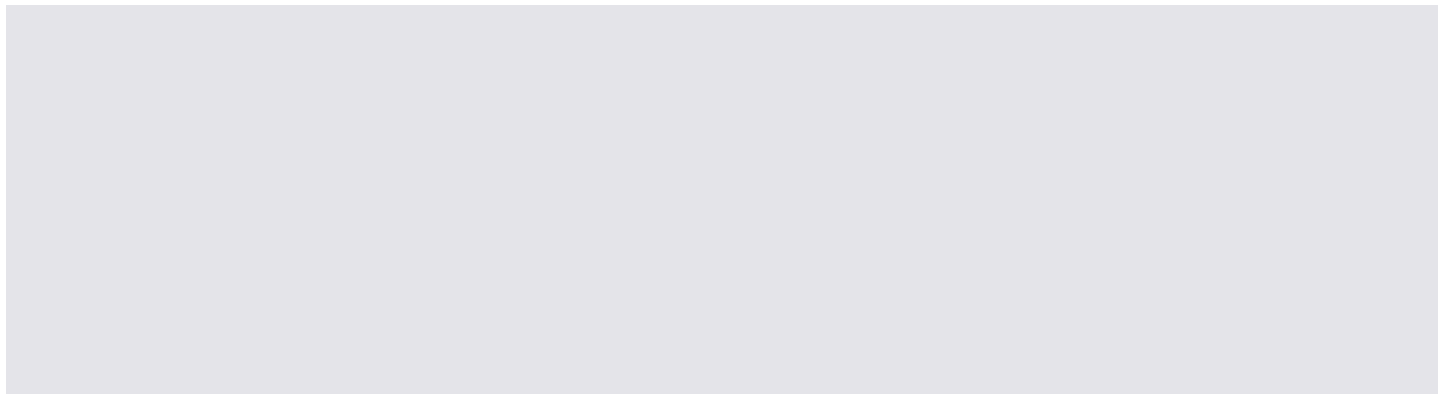
How can you tell your story so that depending on where people sit in the audience, they see things differently?

How are your characters universal enough that they can be played by a variety of different people?
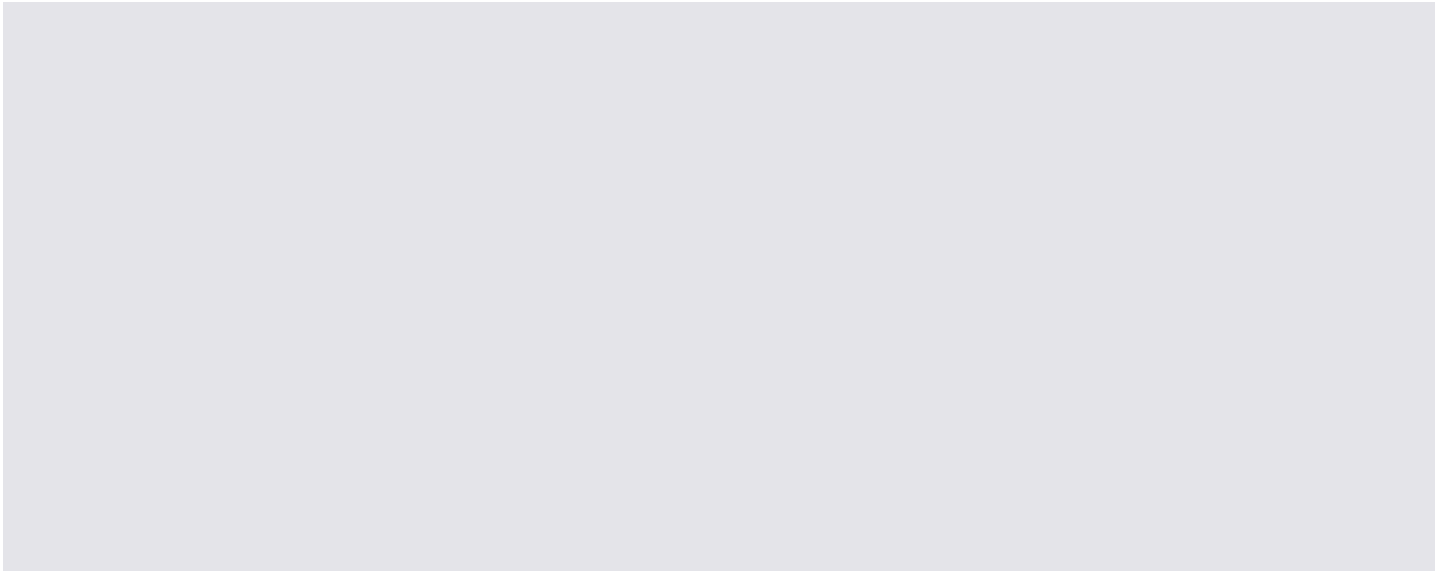
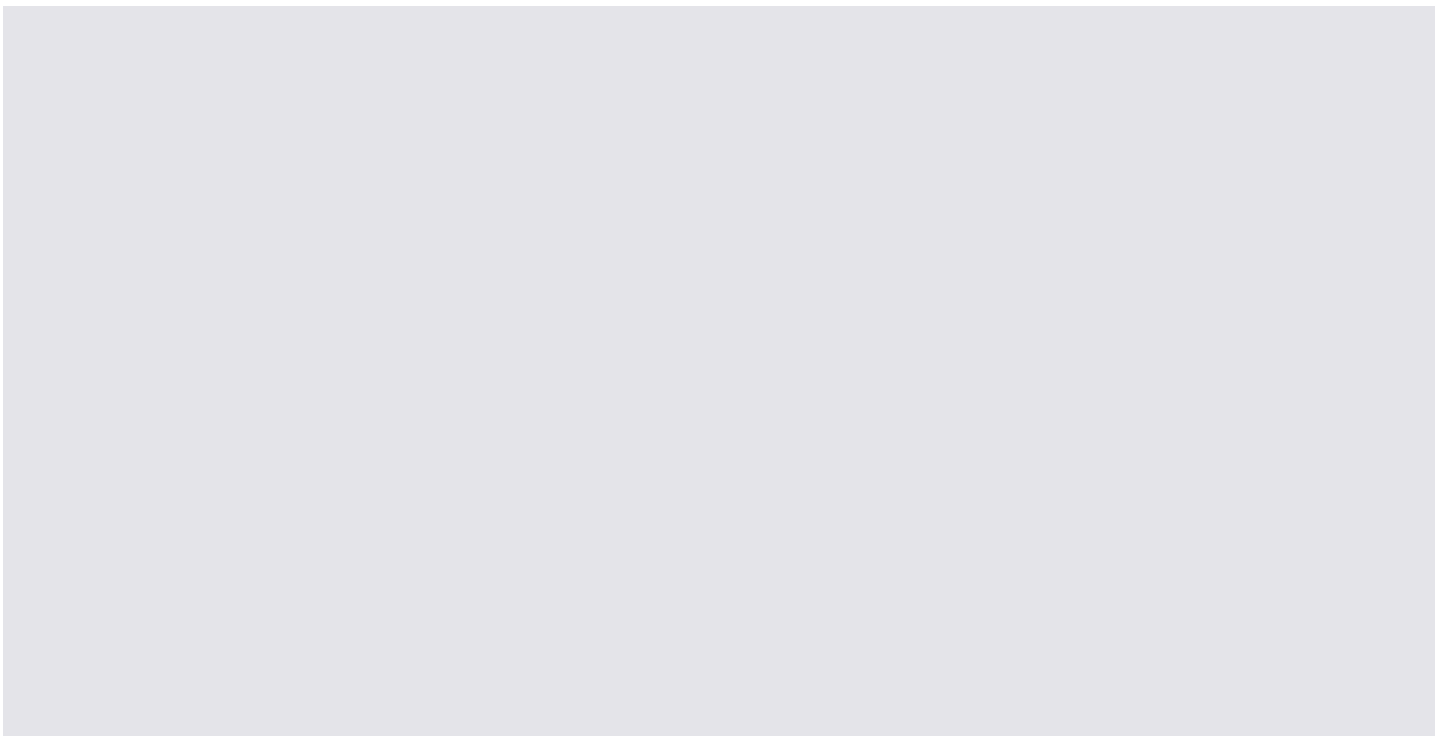What would happen if you stripped away the setting of your story and just had a few items to tell it with?

03. CHALLENGE

If the same actor played two of your characters, how would that change your story?

What about a live performance changes how you tell your story?
Why would people want to see it live versus at a movie theater?

And again:

"What does my story look like as a play?"

What about the live performance and the finite experience would make your story work well as a play? What about the stage itself?
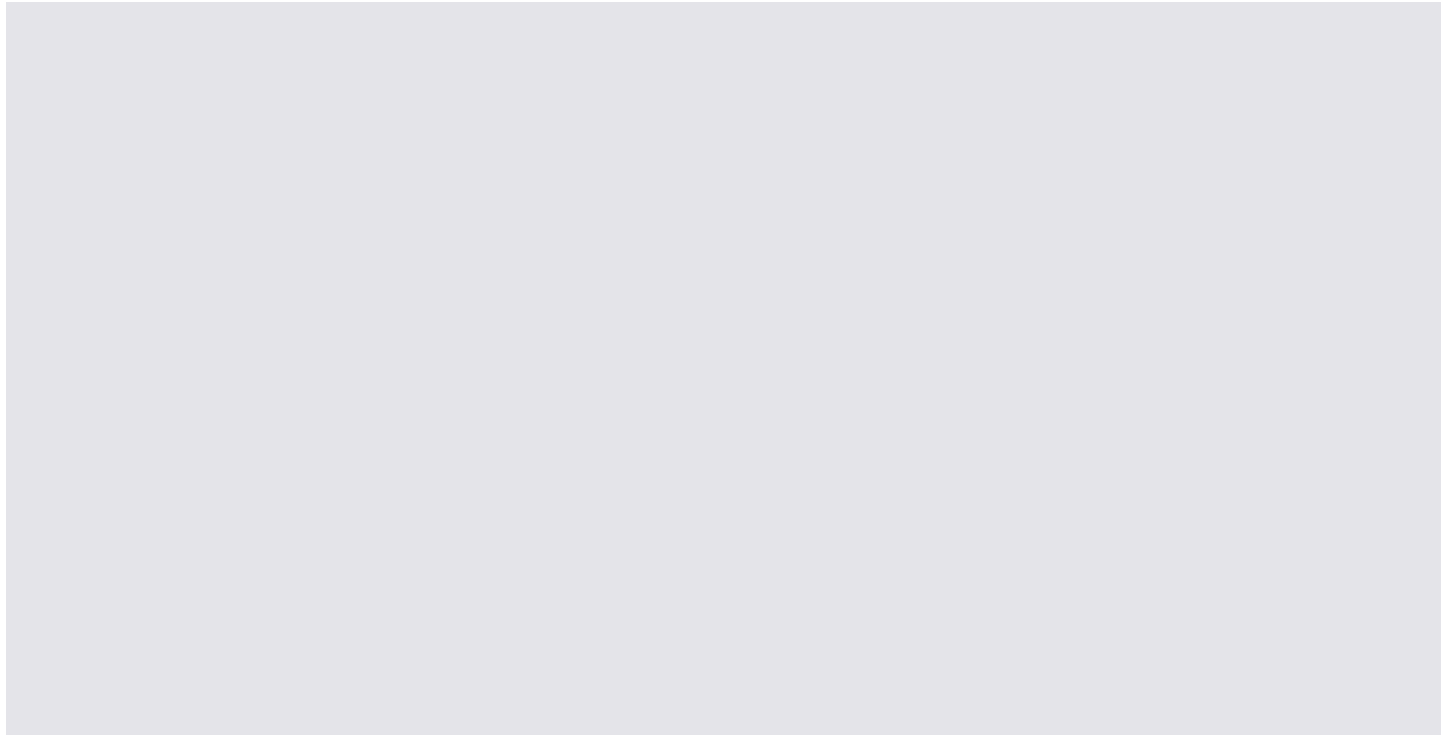
Still having trouble making your story a play? Theater is much less accessible than movies are, especially plays that are adapted into films. If you can see a Shakespeare play performed or some other play and then watch the movie version do it! If not, try reading a play then watching the film version and see how they differ.

"When I'm writing a play I hear it like music. I use the same indications that a composer does for duration. There's a difference, I tell my students, between a semi-colon and a period. A difference in duration. And we have all these wonderful things, we use commas and underlining and all the wonderful punctuation things we can use in the same way a composer uses them in music. And we can indicate, as specifically as a composer, the way we want our piece to sound."

—Edward Albee

VIDEO GAME WRITING

After all these exercises you may be thinking "my story is not the type of story for video games. Only genre stories work in video games," or "my story is too 'literary' or intertexual to be created as a video game" or something of that sort. But you are so far from the truth and should have learned that by now! With the way the industry is going, there are stories about people walking along the beach to stories solving a murder. Because the medium is so new, many types of stories have not made it to the medium just yet, but that does not mean they won't. Instead, use that as inspiration to write the first story of your kind as a video game.

Plus, the best thing about video games? They're like books! They can be two hours long or two hundred! And more often than not that length is determined by the player. Not to mention every single avenue can be explored if you so desire - though you may kill your future game designer. You don't have to create an immersive RPG to tell a good video game story nor does it even need to be a branching, choice-based dialogue game. It can be as simple or as complex as you wish. So with that in mind, go forth with our big question in this chapter and ask yourself:
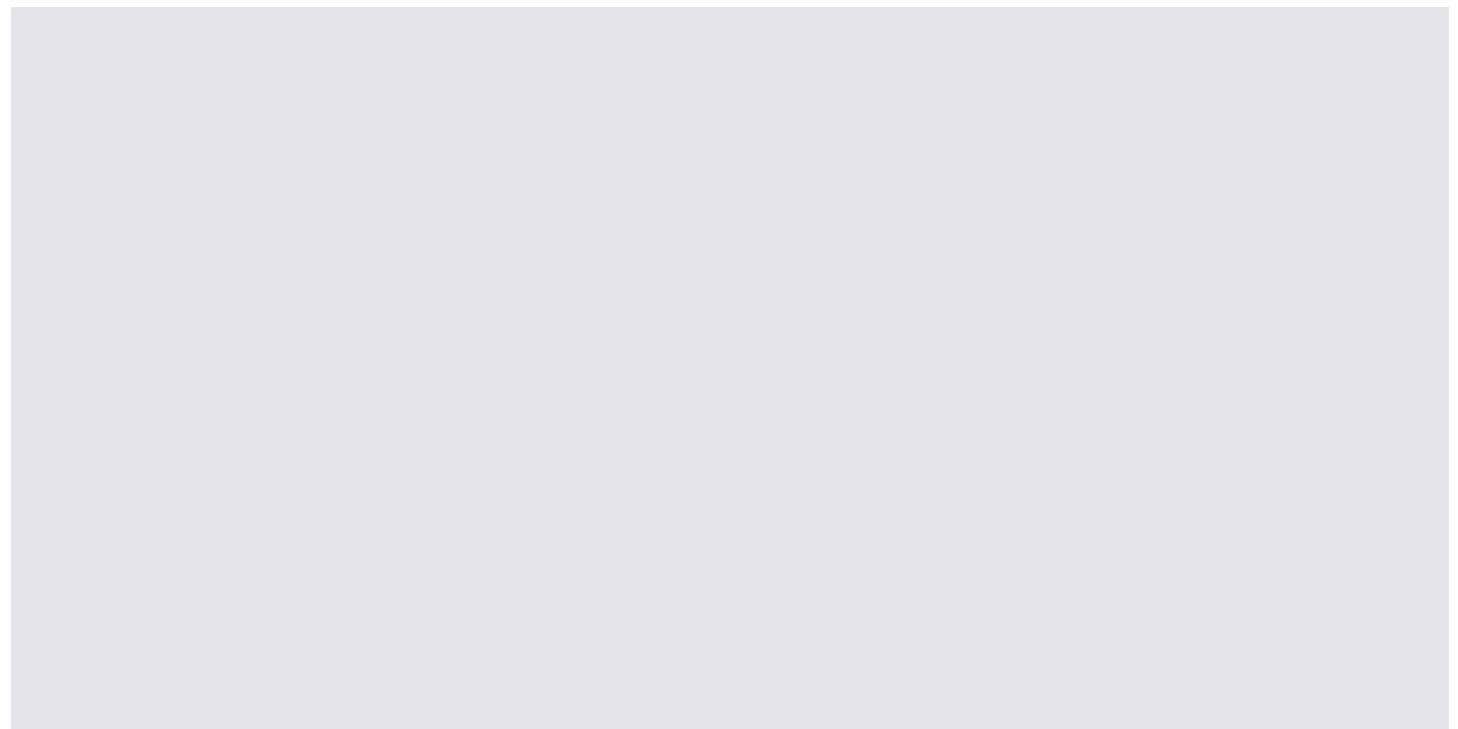
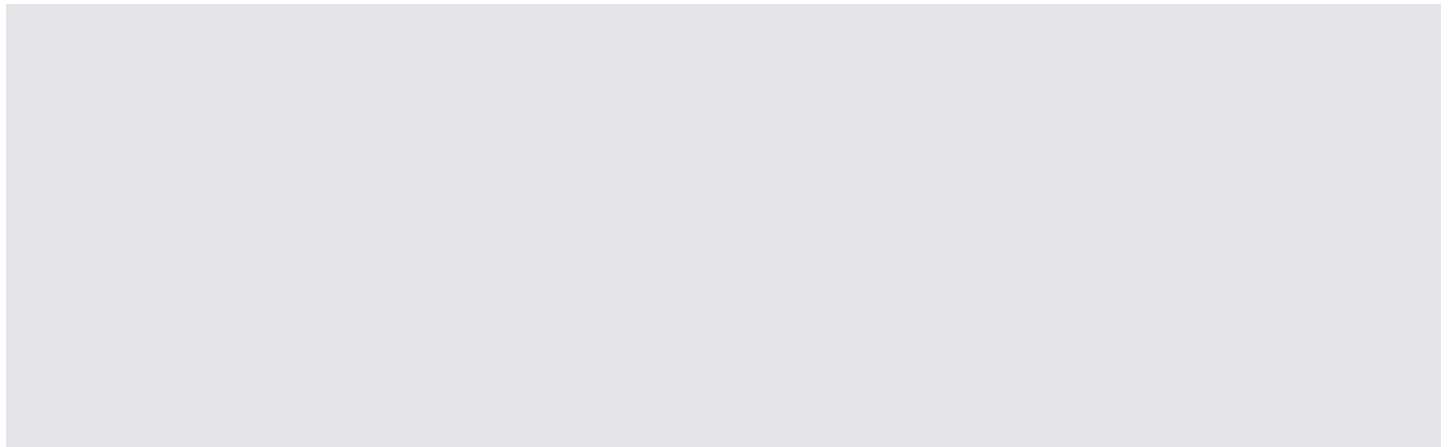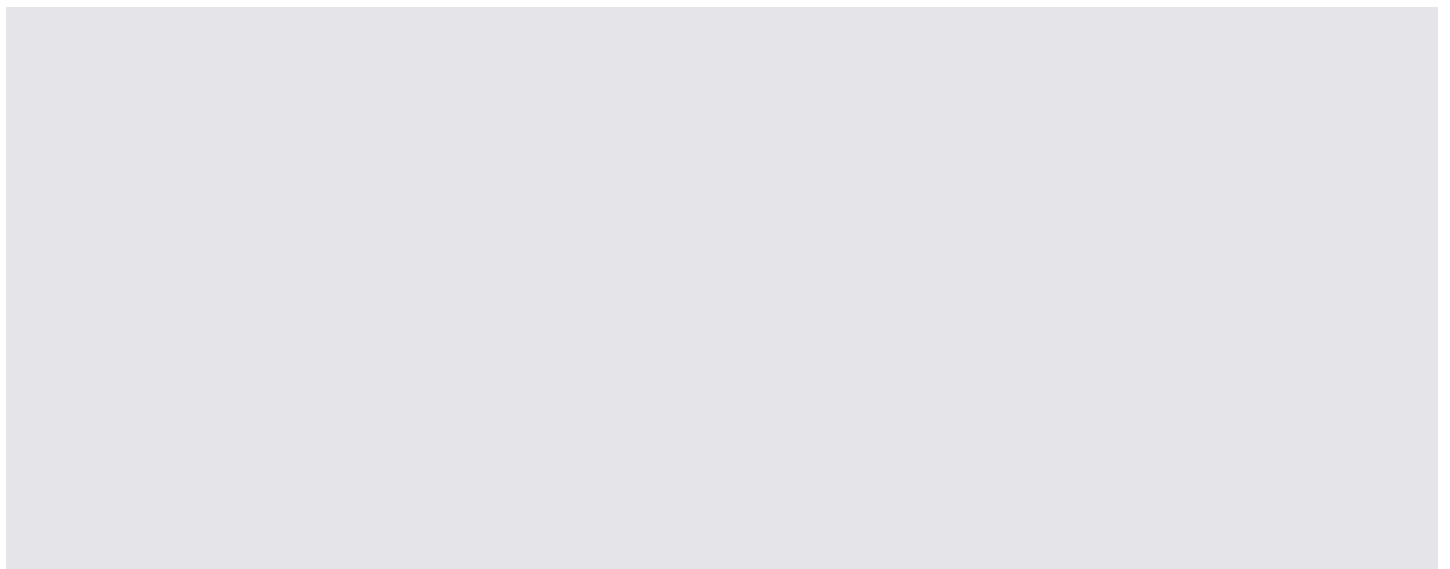## *"What does my story look like as a video game?"*

Because video games are the largest of all the mediums, this exercise will only scratch the surface as to how you can build your world. What's important then to keep in mind is the **player as a character mentality**. As mentioned earlier, this experience is entirely unique to video games and when asking yourself how to further differentiate your story, explore this aspect first. Anytime a question uses "character" and you feel stuck, replace the word with "player" and vice versa. If you still are stuck, think about how both you and the player are storytellers together and see where that takes you!

What are some choices your character makes in your story? If they decided differently, how would that change the story?
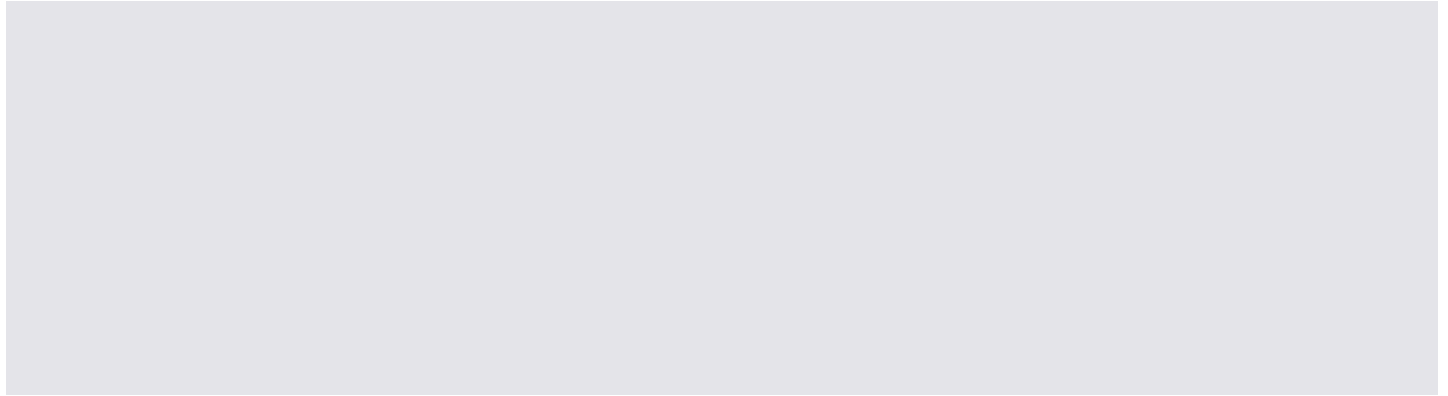
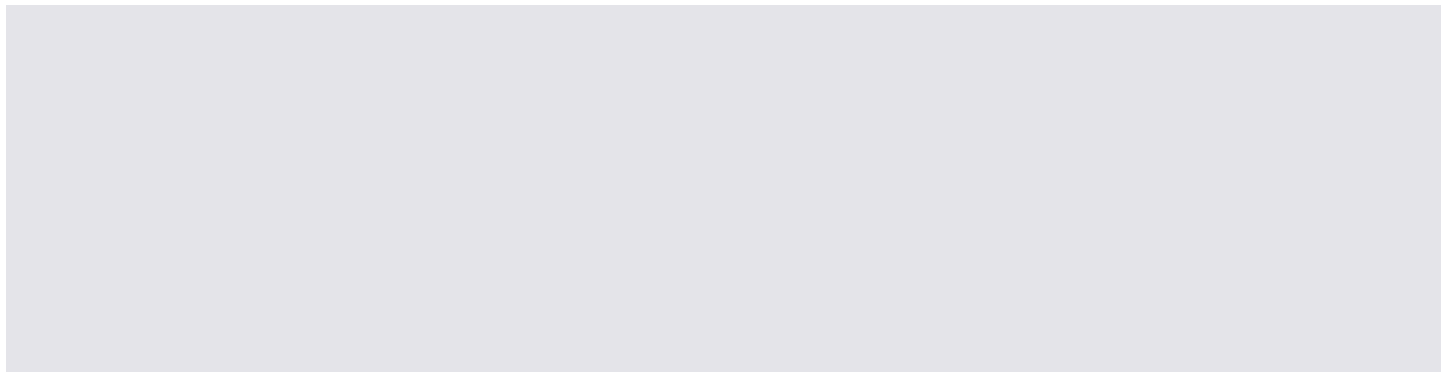**What other outcomes can happen in your story?**
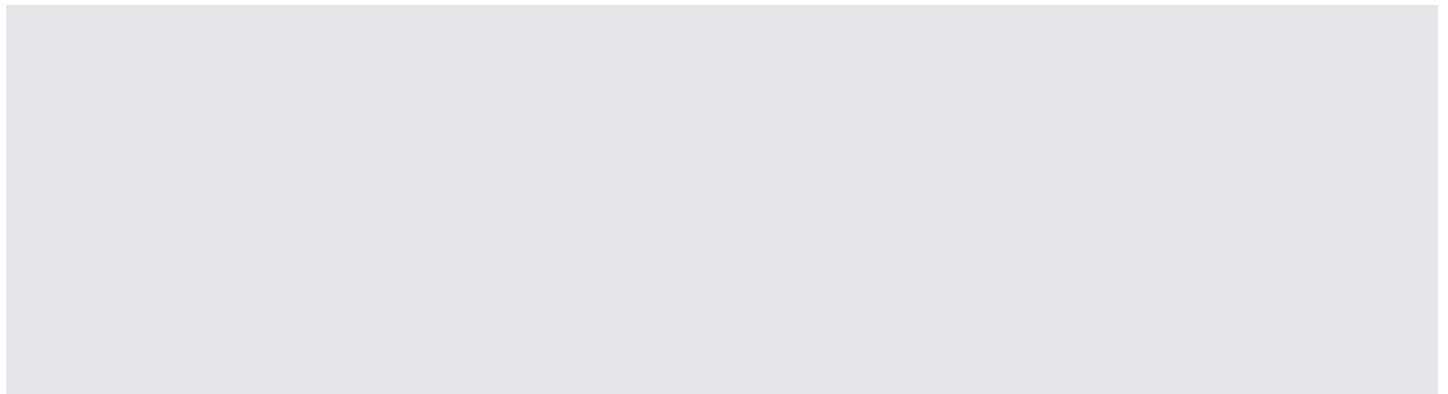
03. CHALLENGE

How can your main character connect to the player? How does the player tell your story?

What are some subplots or characters in your story that could provide a mini-story within your story?
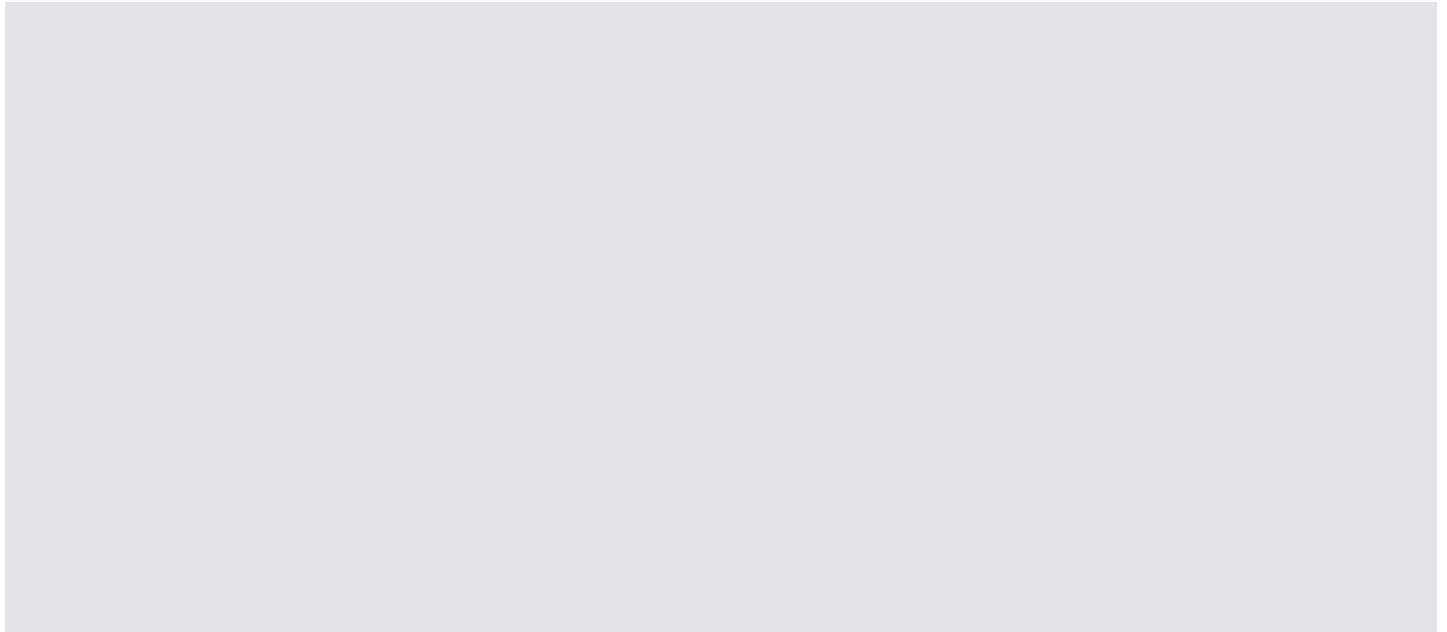
What would exploring your story's world be like? How is it different than just hearing or reading about it?
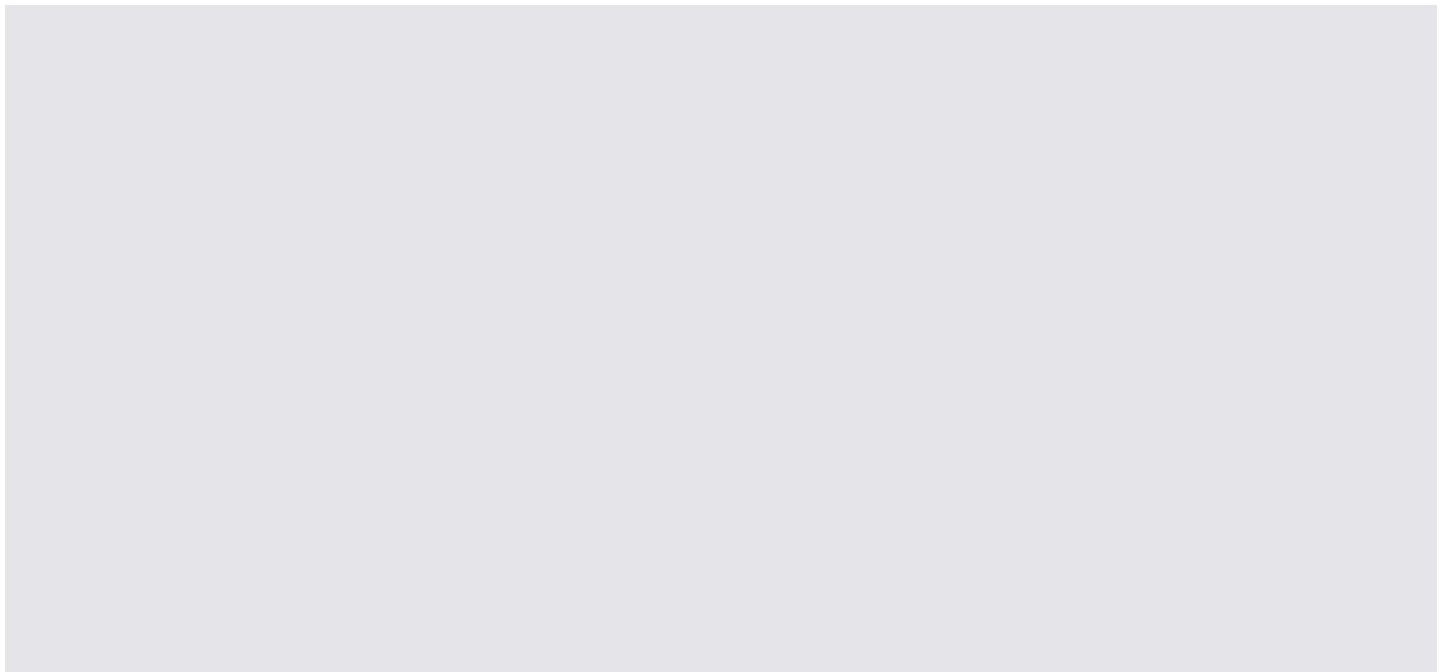
03. CHALLENGE

What back stories or secrets do you have that you can reveal that serve no purpose in the story but are fun all the same?

How would your story change if people could talk to it and it would talk back?
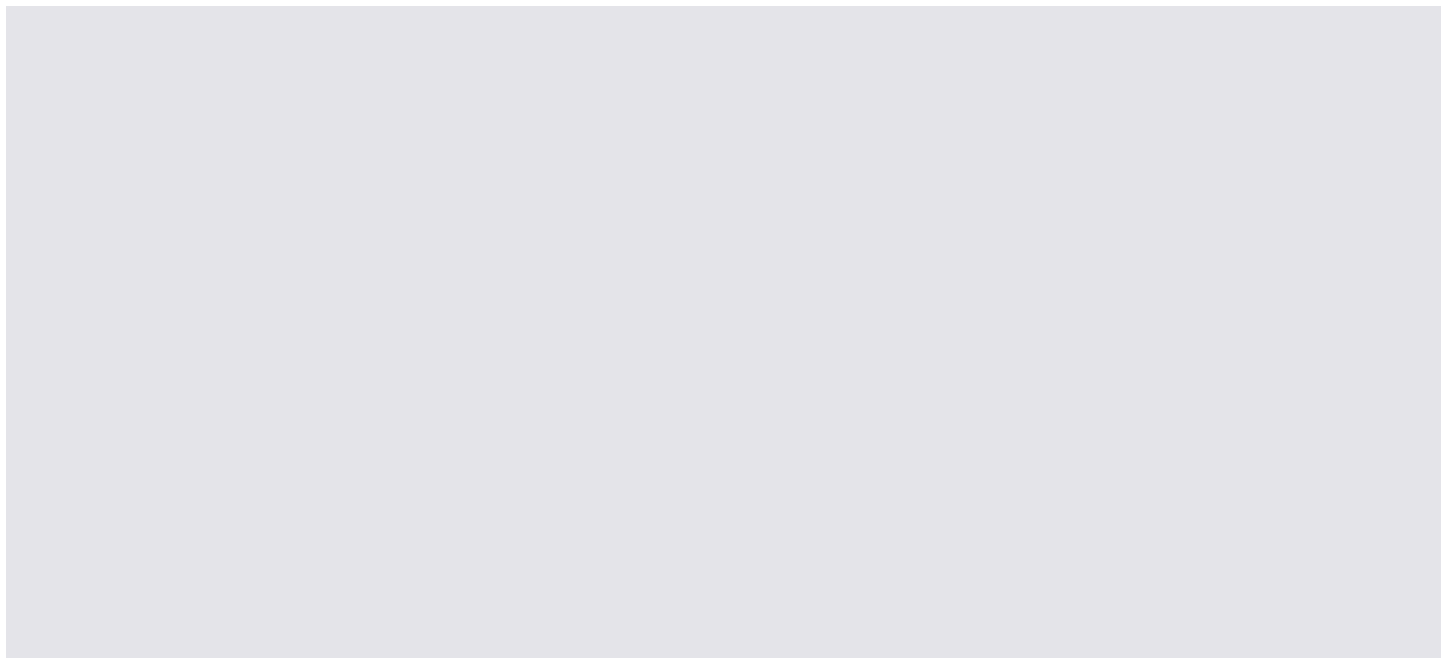
03. CHALLENGE

Finally, once more:

"What does my story look like as a video game?"

What about your story became more tangible? Did you uncover new areas in your character's home or a secret cave inside a huge garden? It's amazing what happens when we let our minds wander around the world of our story!

Did your story end up looking the same? If you've never played a video game that's an easy mistake to make! Even if you have, it's hard to get our mind's to think in multiple dimensions without getting overwhelmed. Don't be hard on yourself. Instead, tackle this exercise again with a simple story to get better practice, then try your hands at your own work after!

> **"While films are a very visual and emotional artistic medium, video games take it one step further into the realm of a unique personal experience."**
>
> *–Jet Li*

So far. So good.

CHAPTER FOUR
PICK

04. PICK

Now that you've worked yourself and your story as hard as you possibly can, it's time for the fun part: picking your story's medium out! While you may feel a bit overwhelmed - you just went through nearly thirty questions about all sorts of storytelling aspects - try your best to compartamentalize your story into four separate projects: the **novel**, the **film**, the **play** and the **video game**. Write out mini versions of these projects below.

The Novel

The Film

The Play

The Video Game

04. PICK

Finding "The One"

Given these summaries above and your general ideas about your four stories, answer the following questions:

Which version of your story left you the most comfortable?

Which version is the best version of your story?

Which left you the most uncomfortable?

Which is the worst version of your story?

04. PICK

The Comfort Zone

More than likely, the medium you picked as the one you're most comfortable with is the medium you approached this book with. If it's not - that's awesome! Regardless as to which situation you're in, it's important to figure out *why* it's your comfort zone.

Is it a medium you write in often? If so, how often?

What elements in this medium make you comfortable?

How easily do you think you could execute your idea in this form? Write out a general timeline or deadline below.

Stepping Out of the Zone

Think about the story form you were most uncomfortable with now. More than likely you're uncomfortable because you're unfamiliar with this medium. Whether you've never written in it before or you don't have enough practice it all comes down to confidence and figuring out how to find it.

Have you written in this medium before? If so, how often?

Are you uncomfortable because you are unfamiliar with this medium *or* because you think the version is bad?

What are some ways you can become more comfortable with this medium?

First is the Worst

We all have bad ideas. In fact we probably have more bad ideas than good ideas. While we're all inclined to weed out the bad ideas and hopefully forget them, given your new approach to storytelling, it's important to understand why you're **story** didn't work in a certain format as it will help train your mind for future story ideas.

Is your worst version and your uncomfortable version the same?

If so, list five steps you can take to familiarize yourself with the medium:

If not, why is this version of your story the worst? Can you rework any areas to make it better?

04. PICK

Second is the Best

It's great to have a great idea. Everything feels right, the words flow easily, the pages fly by - it's like you were meant to do this all along! But just because your idea is great doesn't mean it shouldn't receive the same criticisms all your bad ideas get. In fact, it should receive more! Use these next questions to figure out how to make your best story even better!

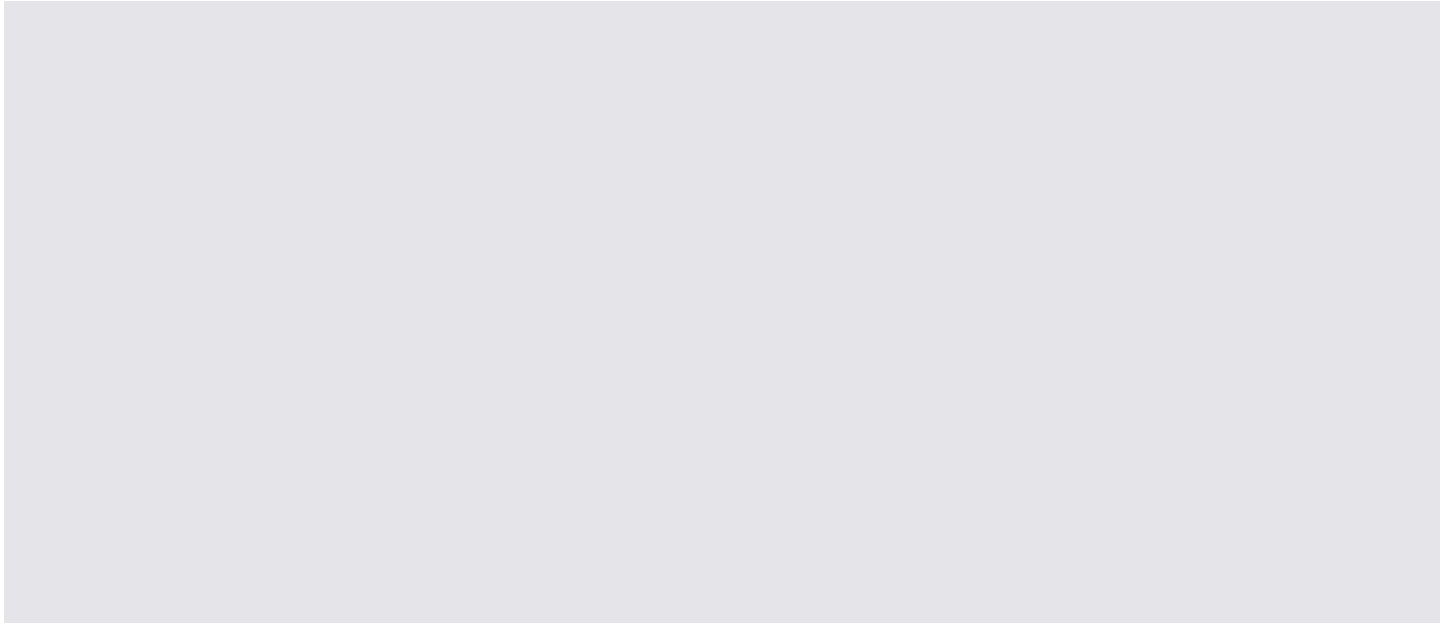**Is your best version and your comfortable version the same?**

If so, how can you take your story out of your comfort zone more?

Are there other elements from the other mediums you can use in your story? If so, list out what they are and how you'll use them.

04. PICK

What is something you love about one other format of your story that you haven't seen done yet in your medium of choice?
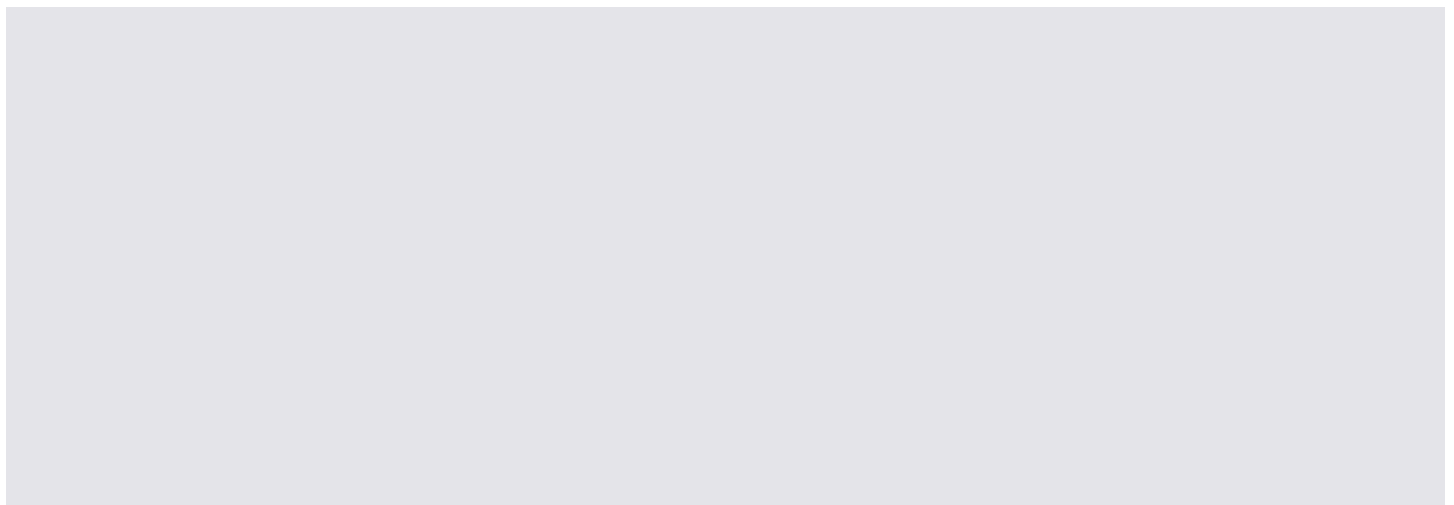
04. PICK

MAKING THE DECISION

Now that you've sorted out your various ideas, it's time for you to actually choose which format you'll use to tell your story! By now you should have a good sense as to which idea is best, but if you still aren't sure, feel free to go for a walk, take a bath or even rest your eyes for a few hours! Let the ideas simmer in your mind. You'd be surprised what some time away might do for your decision making!

However, no matter what you pick, it's important to remember the key philosophy of the Storytelling System:

"Treat your story right and do whatever it takes to tell it in the best way possible. Even if that means getting uncomfortable. Because whether we like it or not, it's the stories people remember, not the people that told them."

While that may seem depressing, once you focus on telling the best stories possible instead of focusing on your name and the credit behind it, you'll find that you inherently begin to tell better stories. And that's what we're all about!

So without further ado, it's really time to pick your story! Write it out the medium in your space below and any other details you want to note for your future masterpiece.

CHAPTER FIVE

TELL

05. TELL

Though perhaps this section does not warrant an entire chapter, it is a step in the process all the same and one of the most important ones. Many of us let ideas just sit in our minds without ever actually executing them. But if you are to become a storyteller in *any* format, you must put pen to paper. It seems obvious, but **ideas are cheap**. And you just spent a very long time working with one idea in four different formats. So do yourself a favor and pledge to not only tell your story, but to give yourself a deadline to finish the first draft and a reward!

I _____, pledge to tell my story and to tell it no later than

_____.

If I succeed, I will reward myself with _____.

Of course, making the pledge is easy. Now you have to actually put in the work! Just keep in mind that the difference between writers and aspiring writers are that the former get the job done even when their work hurts it's so bad. Plus, with the Storytelling System, you have three other formats of your story to fall back on or try out when things stop working! Hooray! All that extra work wasn't totally useless!

Now, what are you waiting for?
Go tell your story!

✌️