Good Morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle, and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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It's often been noted, by better minds than mine, that **the only certainty in life is change**.

It's practically inevitable. As much we want to stay the way we are forever, we can't resist the continual, unrelenting influence of our environments, relationships, and experiences on our character. When we want to belong, we change in order to fit in. When we don't, we change to stand out. When life is easy, we change to enjoy it to the full; when it gets hard, we change to survive it. Even the most fundamental parts of personality can change given a strong enough influence acting over a long enough period of time.

Change is not inherently good or bad – it is only inevitable. Everyone is changing into something daily, whether they're conscious of the process or not. Strong, deeply held beliefs and value systems can slow that change, but sometimes those beliefs break down when faced with the reality around them. On the other hand, if the belief is true, it can reaffirm the change being wrought on a person and push them in bold new directions.

But no matter the number of forces acting on a person's character, they are almost always unbalanced. One is stronger or more persistent than the others, and it shifts the momentum of their journey through life – sometimes irreversibly. This push – this heavily resisted yet irresistible process of change – and its effects on character is what we refer to in storytelling as **character development.**

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Character development is the process of showing depth within a character as a result of changes brought about by events and influence within the story world. In other words, it's **revealing character through change.** Now, revealing what something is by showing it change might sound like an oxymoron. After all, how can you tell what something is if it's changing in front of your eyes? The shortfall of that way of thinking, however, is that it **treats personhood as a concept, rather than a process.** We like to

think of the self as solid, immutable, and singular, but in reality it's flexible, changeable, and multifaceted. While it is one substance, it's one substance in the way any living, growing thing is. An acorn is the same as a sapling is the same as a tree, and at the same time, they're completely different in form and function. In a lot of ways, to refer to a tree is really to refer to something undergoing the process of being or becoming a tree. When you take a picture of a tree, the process seems stopped… but in reality, the tree is changing, growing, and, eventually,dying.

The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle states that you can either exactly measure the position of a particle *or* its velocity, but never both at the same time. Something very similar could be said about characters. By the time the story starts, they're already moving towards change. That change may be slow enough that it feels like they're stuck in a rut, but they're still moving. We may focus on where they are for a brief moment, but eventually, **we'll have to explore their character not by examining who they are at that moment, but the ways in which they're changing.**

In the last episode, I described the process of character design through the metaphor of planetary layers. While it might seem like a contradiction to now talk about the fact that characters are not permanent but constantly changing, remember that planets only seem eternal on a human timescale. Planets are born in interstellar dust, formed by gravity, shaped by continental drift, and eventually burnt away by the expansion of their sun. On the timeline of the cosmos, all this happens in a hectic blur.

Another note from the lesson on Planet Character: I mentioned that character change, like molten rock inside the earth's mantle, rises out of and sinks back towards the core. It's an action that moves outward from the true self into the exterior world, encounters resistance, and returns to the true self in a continual cycle. This process of cyclical change from the inside out is what I'm going to refer to as **the character wheel**.

The Character Wheel is the main method of action for Character Development. It is the cycle that characters undergo constantly in the course of all stories, though the degree to which it affects character development varies widely. In the conscious experience of the character, it begins with **want** – a desire for a certain outcome or object that they don't currently have. The character

then makes a **choice** – "this is how I will pursue my want." Choice leads to an **Action** based on that choice, and that action to an **Effect**. This is the point at which the Character Wheel moves from the internal world of the character to the exterior world of the story, and consequently, the moment when the gap between expectation and reality opens up.

As good ol' Newton won't let us forget, every action has an equal and opposite **Reaction**… though in the case of story, it is not always equal, though it's almost always opposite. After all, if a character wanted something, took an action to get it, and accomplished their goal, they would not need to change – and there would be no story.

This negative reaction from the story world leads to a **Perception** by the character, and an internal **Response** based on that perception. It's at this point that the character wheel moves back towards the internal world of the character. As a result of their conscious response, the character undergoes a personal **Adaptation** – usually small, almost imperceptible. This adaptation effects the **Want**, returning the character to the beginning of the cycle to begin all over again.

The change to the want *could* be to the object of that want, but in most stories, the core want of the character remains constant, in order to form a consistent through-line for the story – Bond wants to save the world, Frodo wants to be free of the ring's influence, Indiana Jones wants to know what the Ark of the Covenant really is, etc. However, the *big want* typically has many steps that need to be accomplished before it's achieved, and in this way the *little want* at the start of the character wheel can change with each cycle. In other cases, the want may only change in intensity or direction – the character might want it more once they learn they can't have it, or their reason for wanting it could change. As Want is part of the conscious interior of the character, the changes it undergoes ripple down to affect the psychological/moral need, and then begin to change the true self.

This feedback loop – from true self to need to want and back again – amplifies change as the stakes of the story grow and more and more extreme adaptations are needed to keep going. Even so, each individual cycle within the character wheel must be **organic and gradual**, arising from the personality of the character

rather than being forced in by the author. Extreme situations often require extreme change, but make sure you're not skipping steps in your character's development or making leaps that will seem forced or melodramatic to the reader or audience. **People, by instinct, resist change. Your characters should be just as reluctant.**

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Now to shift gears, step back, and look at **Character Arcs**. While the Character Wheel provides a way of visualizing the process of moment-by-moment change, writing a narrative using only that method will result in something that is less than the sum of its parts. Thinking of character change only from moment to moment robs the story of momentum – **the feeling that characters are moving away from one mode of being and towards another.** Your characters may not reach it, and may even end up worse out than when they started, but creating the *feeling* of momentum is vital to the reader's enjoyment of the story. Without a sense of where the story *should* go, they're robbed of the satisfaction of seeing it accomplished or the catharsis of witnessing a noble failure.

For a long time, I didn't understand the term "Character Arc," and for that reason, I largely ignored the concept as an effective tool for character change. In my view, the best types of character change were linear – moving from a worse internal state to a better one. The idea that it *arced* – that it went up and down – struck me as utterly unhelpful. However, in researching for this episode, I finally realized what a dunce I was being. My problem with the idea was more than just conceptual – it was mathematical.

See, an arc isn't just a curved line… it's a description of a segment of a complete circle: the curve between two points in a complete round. It shows the progress of a single segment from one point to another in a larger, ongoing process. Sound familiar?

Realizing my mistake, I developed the idea of a **Value Circle** to make sense of the concept for myself (and I promise, this is the last trademark Homestead on the Corner visual metaphor I'll use this episode). Begin with any moral or ethical value – courage, honesty, success, etc. – and place it in the center of a circle. Then,

at the top and bottom of the circle, set the extreme positive and extreme negative state of those values in a character (at least for the sake of your story… values are tricky things, and any nuanced evaluation of vice and virtue depends almost entirely on context). Think honestly about the value and the type of story you want to tell, and figure out what major character trait will be defined as the lack of that value, and which will represent an abundance of it. For an Honesty Value Circle, the positive pole would be a character who is completely honest in every situation. The negative pole would be someone who's entirely deceptive. Now, directly between these two extremes, place the neutral position – for instance, the neutral for honesty might be a pragmatist… someone who doesn't value the truth or want to lie, but uses whichever immediately benefits them.

A quick note about value systems in story. Every story has one – it's impossible to portray characters progressing towards or away from a necessary change without making some statement about what is good and what is not. This might sound terrifying if you desperately want to avoid being preachy or judgmental in your writing, and for a while I fought this idea in my own writing. But I eventually had to conclude that even the most tolerant, open-minded individuals make moral judgements – even if they're only against intolerance and ignorance. Good writing is honest writing. Say what you believe, but first create a well-crafted story with relatable characters and a strong plot. Your beliefs about the world will come through naturally in your choices, whether you think about it or not.

Now, between the negative and neutral on the value circle, map out the different modes of behavior require to change from a deceptive person to a pragmatist. Someone might shift from being inherently deceptive to your average run-of-the-mill liar – using falsehoods often, but not directly to deceive. Then examine the gap between neutral and positive. How does a character change from a pragmatist to someone who values honesty? They would need to go through a process of opening up, risking their own success, and learning the intrinsic value of truth before reaching that zenith… and that's a slow process.

In fact, each step in the process is slow. Having a character swing from one pole of the value circle to the other without adequately

showing the motivation for that change makes your story seem like it's moralizing or preachy – see last-second alter calls and spur-of-the-moment conversions in bad religious films. No one ever flips their personality like a coin. Even if the influences are known only to the person undergoing the change, they must be *shown* in the story… otherwise it feels like the author is *telling* you they changed, and we all know what the first rule of good storytelling is.

(Side note: I believe that this is why the five-year time jump in Avengers: Endgame felt so jarring. We were told that Thor spent five years falling into clinical depression and emotional eating, that the Hulk came to terms with his animal rage, and that Hawkeye became a full-on murderer without being shown *any of it*. While more consistent POV characters like Ant Man, Captain America, and Black Widow grounded the film, that sudden jump would've crippled the narrative in a poorer script.)

Now, take a look at your value circle. One side of it should be completely filled out – the progression from negative to neutral to positive. This 180-degree half-circle represents the most popular character arc – the movement of the protagonist from a complete lack of one value to a fullness of it. For instance, *Les Mis* tracks a journey from selfishness to selflessness over the course of 17 years and nearly 2,000 pages… an epic in both senses of the word. But it's far from the only possible character arc. In more limited dramas, characters might move only slightly along the negative to positive arc… say by five small, but very meaningful degrees. Characters might arc in the opposite direction as well – from full positive to complete negative. Macbeth goes from a noble warrior to a murderous traitor within the first act of The Scottish Play, then continues to descend through degrees of mental disintegration before finally losing his head (literally).

This is what the other side of your value circle is for – showing the negative shadow of positive character arcs. In many cases, it features the same steps, only backwards – but not always. The process of transforming from an honest person into a deceptive one features many of the same intermediary steps, but not all of them – for instance, rather than learning the value of truth, an honest person might realize all that can be gained by lying. Examine each step on the arc you wish to explore honestly, and

make sure that you can see the logical ways a person might be changed from one to the next by the gradual influence of their experiences.

Be sure to remember that all of your characters are living, breathing, changing people in the world of the story – but not all of them need apparent arcs within your narrative. Your protagonist should always have a compelling arc that is clearly shown, but sometime supporting allies and enemies are noteworthy for their lack of change in the midst of a chaotic world. These types of characters usually represent values rather than actual personalities, and they can be dangerous if overused. The best supporting characters, I've found, are the ones who have arcs that reflect the protagonist's. Perhaps they are further along the same value circle, or represent the opposite starting position and journey, functioning as a foil. As I mentioned in the Character Web episode, many of the most powerful stories also feature an antagonist with an arc and a change that runs parallel to the protagonist's journey. Whatever the case, treat each of your major characters as people constantly undergoing change – but also remember where you want the focus of your story to lie, and keep that focus clear by showing only the important details.

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There are a few archetypical arcs (say that five times fast) that show up in narratives more often than others. I've already mentioned the 180-degree negative-to-positive arc – **the "epic" arc**, showing the complete transformation of a person over an extended period of time. Then there's the 180-degree positive-to-negative arc – the **"fall from grace" arc** seen in so many tragedies. But 90-degree arcs in both directions are not uncommon either, seen in the **"lukewarm to leader"** arcs of stories about social upheaval, as well as in **"corruption of innocence"** arcs of many urban dramas. Some character arcs are more unusual. For instance, it's possible to write a character who goes from neutral to positive and then down into negative… for instance, in stories of business moguls who achieve success and are then undone by it. Conversely, you could also write about a character who arcs into the negative at the beginning, then crawls their way back up to positive.

However you choose to write your character arcs, remember that they need to **progress naturally along the value circle, driven by a continuous action of the character wheel that is shown, not told.** When in doubt, slow the process of change down – people will fight the need for uncomfortable personal change tooth and claw, while most authors want to get to the "good stuff" as quickly as possible. Take your time, make sure you understand why your characters are changing, and be honest in the way you show that change to your reader.

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Now that we've discussed developing the character web, exploring planet character, and building character arcs, let's put these tools together and return to the story of dear, dear old Bob. When last we left him, he left a compulsive liar by a childhood of parental abuse – an experience that moved him from neutral to his negative position on the value wheel at the start of the narrative. He's abandoned yet another job, fled town on a greyhound bus after an interaction with an old woman that showed both his kindness *and* his dishonesty, and is currently moving towards an uncertain future. His want – to get away from his responsibilities – led him to make a choice and take an action: to walk off the job and skip town. The effect of that action causes a reaction – his boss called him, angry and upset at his betrayal. That's perceived by Bob as further incentive to leave, and his response is to follow through on his plans. He also slightly adapts his want, increasing the degree to which he wants to escape. Let's pick up as the bus arrives at its destination…

Night has fallen on the road, and Bob, exhausted at the end of the workday (even if he didn't finish it), is fast asleep on the bus. It suddenly shudders to a halt, and the driver calls out that this is the last stop. Bob, groggy and disoriented, stumbles out, thanks the driver, and tries to figure out where he is – not that he cares too much, so long as it's far away. He finally notices the sign on the bus stop. Looking closer, he reads an all-too-familiar name. Before he can react, the doors of the bus close and the driver pulls away. Bob tries to chase after him for a moment, but gives up after a few yards. There's no point in denying it – he's home.

His want, and the action he took to achieve it, has been met with an unexpectedly harsh reaction from the story world – he's been

dumped on the doorstep of the one place he never wanted to go back to. In reaction, he first tries to catch the bus, then wanders into town to find a cheap motel where he can avoid being recognized by anyone. His want is only growing stronger – he wanted to escape his responsibilities, and now he's surrounded by people who will try to hold him responsible for his entire life. He decides to try the Motel 6 at the edge of town (choice and action), but discovers that it's run by one of his former friends – one he hurt deeply and who now refuses to rent him a room, knowing that Bob won't pay his bill. Their short, terse conversation makes it clear that Bob won't be able to find a hotelier in this town that trusts him, and so he reacts by walking out. He adapts his want slightly – he still wants to escape, but it's getting colder and darker by the minute and he needs a place to stay.

His options all-but-exhausted, Bob makes one last, desperate choice, walking several miles to a small house in the middle of town. After a long time hesitating on the threshold, Bob rings the doorbell. A tired, elderly woman opens the door, baseball bat hanging at her side. Her eyes go wide when she sees his face. "Hi Mom," Bob says, smiling. Mom takes a step back – then swings the bat at him. He just barely manages to dodge out of the way.

After he finally calms her down, he explains his situation: his girlfriend kicked him out, stole his savings, and left him with no choice but to come home. He obviously spent the last few minutes on the sidewalk composing this lie, and despite his mother's interrogation, his story holds up. She lowers the baseball bat and tells him to come inside. Bob grins as he climbs the steps, then hesitates a moment on the threshold as he realizes the situation he's trapped himself in. Unsure what tomorrow will bring, he shuts the door behind him and steps into the next stage of his journey.

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Throughout what would function as the first act of "Bob's Story" (coming never to a bookstore near you), you can see the action of the character wheel as it moves along Bob's arc. Negative reactions lead to a steady escalation of Bob's choices and actions to achieve his want. His small want adapts to the moment, while still remaining focused on the big Want of his character – to escape responsibility. His action towards that goal is shaped and

limited by his subconscious Trauma – his compulsive need to lie in order to avoid pain. And as he makes choices and faces resistance from the story world, small changes begin to appear in his Conscious and Unconscious interiors that will build up over the course of the narrative to push him along the Value Circle.

In these last three lessons, I've talked about the key elements of Character in the Story Triangulum. If you remember, Story forms the base of the triangle, Character the left side, and Plot the right. The Character Web is nearest to the base on the left side, serving in many ways as the intersection between Character and Story. The cast of characters is part of the larger story world, and thus shaped in many ways by the type of story being told. Planet Character and character design are in the middle of the line, representing characters in stasis and isolation examined from the inside out. The Character Wheel and Character Arcs are at the top of this side of the triangle, where it meets the line of Plot. It represents characters in motion, moving through the world and changing under the influence of the Plot – the series of events within the narrative, both motivated by other characters and impersonal forces.

In many ways, **plot is where the rubber meets the road – where characters begin to move and change and grow.** It's the point where characters become more than ideas, characterization, or philosophical ideas – it's where they cease to be a snapshot, and become living things undergoing the process of being such and such a character. **Character is action in time by an ever-changing entity that still maintains its essential unity.**

Look at your own life and see the ways in which the things you want and the things you do shift, both from moment to moment and in the larger narrative of your personal history. Honestly examine yourself, see the ways in which you think, act, and exist, and show these to your reader honestly and effectively. If you'll indulge me one more time, let me reiterate that when writing characters, the truest and best source for inspiration… is you.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's characteristically character-driven conversation was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, with music from

the person currently undergoing the process of being Lauren Baker.

Want to see the escalating series of actions and reactions in other people? Social media is always a good petri dish to cultivate the strangest strains of human behavior, and you can find me there on Twitter and Instragram as trevor_vw. If you enjoyed this show, please share it out, and be sure to check out homesteadonthecorner.com for extra content, outtakes, and more info about the show.

Next episode, Homestead is going west with a new short story in the tradition of *Gunsmoke, The Lone Ranger*, and other classic radio westerns. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it, and please rate and review us on Apple Podcast! It really does help get this show out to more people.

Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.