

“Floor 9.5” – A Story Grid analysis with Shawn Coyne

Welcome to a very special and extended episode of The Intronaut. As you all know, I believe good stories can save the world. Whether you’re creating them or consuming them, story helps us make sense of our world. It has for tens of thousands of years. Even if you don’t consider yourself a creative, I strongly recommend you listen to this episode. I’m proud to introduce a special guest today, Shawn Coyne, editor and creator of *The Story Grid*. I’m pretty sure Shawn is an introvert, although I’ve never asked him outright. I first heard Shawn describe his storytelling methodology on Joanna Penn’s podcast, *The Creative Penn*. It’s a system he created while working as an editor for the publishing industry for more than twenty-five years. Since finding Shawn and his methodology, I’ve used *The Story Grid* on dozens of my titles and counting. I was recently trained by Shawn and Tim Grahl to be a certified Story Grid editor.

Some people get overwhelmed by their first exposure to *The Story Grid*. It just so happened that I had a run of good luck on Friday the 13th. I was watching a baseball game with my kids, who are twelve and fifteen, which means they don’t pay attention for very long. A Skittles commercial came on and everyone in the room stopped, and we were glued to the television for the next two minutes. I shared this video with Shawn and asked him if he wanted to analyze this one-hundred and twenty seconds of film with *The Story Grid* approach because I thought it was a simple and easy way to get to the core concept for this methodology. He enthusiastically agreed, and that’s what you’re going to hear in today’s episode.

Part of their bite sized, horror Halloween ad campaign, the Marrs company ran several two-minute horror films. The one we’re going to watch and discuss is called, *Floor 9.5*. The film was written by Simon Allen, directed by Toby Meakins, and stars Gina Campbell from the Netflix series, *Black Mirror*. *Floor 9.5* is cool in so many ways, and Shawn and I are going to dig into it. For those of you who are a bit squeamish when it comes to horror, this aired on network television. It contains no profanity, in fact, there’s very little dialogue. No sexual situations and no gore. So it is safe for all audiences.

We go deep on this short film and discuss its relevance as a horror film and what it might say about us in our world. I know you’ll love it as much as I did. Trust me, you don’t have to be a

novelist to enjoy this episode. If you are a writer, make sure you check out <http://theauthorcopilot.com/floor95/> where I put other resources for using *Floor 9.5* as an introduction to Coyne's *The Story Grid* approach, and the link is in the show notes.

So I will be back with a regular episode next week. Now ladies and gentlemen, I present to you *Floor 9.5*, a *Story Grid* analysis with Shawn Coyne.

J: *Floor 9.5*, Shawn. Quite an interesting little film. Before we dive into *The Story Grid* analysis of this two-minute horror movie, I was wondering if you had any general thoughts or feelings about it.

SHAWN: I thought it was a brilliant piece of storytelling in a very short amount of time. There's no dialogue except for a couple of lines. The cinematography was perfect. What it showed to me was that oftentimes writers, directors, screenwriters, and novelists, we get so obsessed with the mechanics that we forget that story is very, very simple. When it's done well, it hooks us, it builds tension, it pays off at the end. It's nice that Skittles actually was able to pay for this, and now I have a much better feeling about Skittles that I would have otherwise.

J: You're going to be handing them out this Halloween, is that what you're saying?

SHAWN: I might. The best thing in this kind of film making to show that they care about it makes a difference to me. It's so much better than those horrible commercials where the kid grows Skittle zits, and they eat the Skittles off his face.

J: I'm glad it hit you that way. We hadn't talked about it prior to this call. What really caught my eye about this particular commercial, it's part of a series that Skittles produced called *Bite Sized Horror*, and this is one of several very short films. It's exactly what you said, and we're going to come back to this towards the end, talking about the significance of the bare bones, efficient storytelling. I was watching television with my kids who are teenagers, and when this came on, they stopped what they were doing for the whole two minutes. That's not something that typically happens during commercials.

SHAWN: Right.

J: Great. Well I thought first what we could do is dissect this movie and put it into the context of the Five Commandments of Storytelling. That seems to be one of the most powerful elements of the methodology that you developed. I was wondering if you want to take a look at some of the questions we should be asking or if we want to talk about the Five Commandments in order, however you prefer to proceed.

SHAWN: I like to begin with a question because questions lead you into answering the Five Commandments in a much better way. They are also very helpful when you're analyzing scenes and doing Story Grid spreadsheets. I've said this before, and I'll say it a million times: a lot of people get wrapped up in the global structure of a novel, screenplay, television series, long form, or whatever. It really does boil down to the effectiveness of your individual scenes. So when people ask me how to become a better writer, just like asking a bricklayer that, what they would say is you need to concentrate on each brick. You really need to make sure that each brick is aligned properly, that you have enough mortar there, that you're cleaning it properly, and you prepare properly, and all those things.

This little commercial is a great example of a purely, well-done scene that could multiply over and over and over in ways that could build something larger. The best way to analyze the scene for me goes back to my acting days, and these four questions from David Mamet's studio. David Mamet and William H. Macy founded an acting studio back in the 70s called Practical Aesthetics Workshop, and I always go back to it when I'm analyzing a scene because they come up with these four questions that actors use to figure out what the intention of the writer was for that scene. Before they get freaked out and say I don't know what I'm going to do, they use these four questions to really suck them in to figure out what are going to be my acting choices, my active choices from moment to moment or beat to beat.

The first question you always want to ask when you're analyzing scene is ***What are the characters literally doing?*** This is pretty simple. What do you think they're literally doing?

J: Well, I think our protagonist, an unnamed woman, is just simply leaving the office very late at night alone.

SHAWN: Exactly. She's worked late and now she's going home. This is the second question. *What is the essential action of the character or characters?* What that means is, we know she's literally leaving the office. While she's in this scene, she has this essential action that she's doing throughout the scene, meaning she is doing something as she's progressing through time. What do you think that essential action is?

J: My interpretation, and honestly this is always the question that's hardest for me to answer while I'm doing scene work, but what I felt like she was trying to do, she was trying to make sense out of a very bizarre scenario that should be quite normal. Trying to figure out why the elevator is not working and who this guy is. That should be a pretty routine process in her life.

SHAWN: Yeah. To really boil it down to is problem solving. She's problem solving from moment to moment, which is always a really nice action for an actor. When the director was directing her, he probably just said, walk through this scene as if it's really happening and problem solve it. The great thing about this scene too for an actor is that you don't have to be wildly, create anything in your head. All you have to do is act this scene. You act the action. Action for her is problem solving. She does it impeccably well.

So now we get into the meat of the questions. The third question is, *What life value has changed for one or more characters in the scene?* What that means is the character starts in one place and at the end of the scene, they're at another. What has changed for them in their life? What life value do you think?

J: I thought this one was very well done because they mirror each other. I feel like for the woman, her life value has gone from a positive to a negative. She's gone from being a "free person" to being somehow trapped in this loop. The man has an opposite experience. He's gone from negative to positive in that he was trapped at first and now he's free.

SHAWN: Absolutely. Simple, simple. There's only one value that changes. There's a couple of them, but that is really all it boils down to. What I also love about this is that the third element in the scene is never, ever delineating. We don't know what evil force or supernatural force or anything that is behind the circumstances. So that is great, especially for horror. You really want to hold back the answer, the MacGuffin of the evil force as long as you possibly can. Especially in short form, if you can deny it altogether, that's great. That was one of the major things that *Twilight Zone* television series that was so good at doing, it held back the evil solution.

So we have the life values change from freedom to entrapment, and from entrapment to freedom. If we were doing *The Story Grid* spreadsheet under value shift, what we would write is Freedom to hostage or Freedom to slavery or either one of the protagonists. The protagonist is the woman, so it would go from freedom to entrapment.

J: I'd also like to add on your comment on horror. I went to your genre clover diagram. This particular film ticks off all three of those horror elements, which is the unknown force being uncanny, supernatural and ambiguous.

SHAWN: Yes. Let's go through those again. The uncanny horror film or horror story means that the force of evil is explainable. In this case, we really don't know. I would say that this short is an ambiguous. Uncanny would be things that explainable like a serial killer or a freaky monster. A monster that genetically altered,

J: A slasher film or something like that.

SHAWN: Exactly. Or someone's who's possessed by evil. There's nothing you can do to stop the monster from behaving with evil because they are the embodiment of evil. Supernatural would mean the unexplainable, supernatural forces from the spirit realm that takes over some kind of person. Or a vampire, an immortal being, ghosts, zombies, that kind of thing. Then ambiguous is when you don't know. It could be either. Of course, the ambiguous one is probably the most difficult to pull off because everybody wants some sort of explanation.

J: Yes.

SHAWN: So that's another reason why this one was so very well done is that it's an ambiguous horror story. What is it? A minute?

J: Two minutes.

SHAWN: Wow, incredible. Let's go through The Five Commandments. I'll just list them here for all those who have forgotten them.

Inciting incident, progressive complications that lead to a turning point. The turning point is the little buddy of progressive complications. It's the penultimate complication that leads to a crisis, which is always a question. Do I do this or this?

Then there's the climax, which is the choice of the protagonist. Then there's the resolution. What do you think is the exciting incident?

J: I think it's the moment where the woman realizes something is not right. I believe it's when the elevator starts to malfunction. The floor readout.

SHAWN: Absolutely. Totally agree. Up until that point, it's all scene setting. It's all establishing where we are, what time it is, who we're watching. There's a lot of possibilities we don't know are going to happen. The choice of a woman protagonist is a great choice because it could be any number of things, especially in this day and age, the Harvey Weinstein's of the world. It was a great choice.

Let's talk about progressive complications.

J: I feel like there's a couple here. It's amazing that I think there's more than one in a hundred and twenty second film. I feel like the first one is the door opens, but it opens on a floor that

doesn't exist. Floor 9.5.

SHAWN: Yep, definitely.

J: And you have this creepy man who is facing away from the woman with his head down. I feel like that's the first complication.

SHAWN: I would absolutely agree with that.

J: Cool. I felt like the progressive complication went right to a turn. I don't know if this was intentional or not. The woman stepping off the elevator felt like a turn for me. I noticed the camera even zoomed in on her shoe. We got a closeup of her shoe stepping off the elevator, almost as she is stepping over the threshold into the unknown.

SHAWN: I wouldn't agree with that. What I think is when they highlighted that shoe step, it was believe it or not, this little two-minute film has a hero's journey in it. And she is leaving the ordinary world in the extraordinary world. They are highlighting that moment when she steps in, she accepts the call to adventure, when she steps through that threshold.

J: Ahh, yes, yes.

SHAWN: Before, it's only microseconds, she has to make a choice: am I going to accept this call? And she does. So that is definitely a progressive complication when she moves into the extraordinary world. So now the next complication when she starts to walk forward towards the man, he walks the exact same way forward. It's as if she is chasing him from behind, but she is the prey. With a great, great twist, it's unexpected. We think, here's this crazy guy, if she steps out of the elevator, he's going to do something to her. They pull the rug out from complicating it and making it as if she were the one pursuing her supposed attacker.

J: Yes, and this happens at the fifty-eight second mark, which is almost exactly in the middle of the film.

SHAWN: Exactly. That is the point of no return, sort of. That is the place where now she is totally immersed in this world and it's like her brain, she will not allow herself to find out what the hell is going on. Then the guy says, "You have to turn around," something like that.

J: That's exactly right.

SHAWN: So that's the fourth complication. The turning point for me was probably just before that moment, when she discovers every movement that she makes forward, he makes forward too.

J: Yes, you can see it on her face, too, now that you say that. I remember that.

SHAWN: That turns. So now it's almost as if that complication means that she can't solve the riddle unless she tries something new, which gives rise to the crisis after he says, "You have to turn around." That's obviously the crisis for her.

J: Is she going to do it or not? Is she going to listen to this guy who's acting weird?

SHAWN: So let's go story nerdy here for a second.

J: Please do.

SHAWN: We know, I say this all the time, that a crisis is either a best bad choice or irreconcilable goods, right? Let's try to figure out which one this is.

Let's look at it from a best bad choice. If she doesn't turn around, then she could just be stuck on this floor forever with this guy. It's possible that if she doesn't do it, it could be worse. If she does do it, she has no idea what is going to happen. The best bad choice for her could be, if I don't do it, I'm stuck her forever chasing this guy around the floor that I never know what is going to happen. He has information that she believes she doesn't have.

If we look at it from the other point of view, irreconcilable goods would mean this: if she turns around then she will be able to run back to the elevator if he starts to attack her. That would be good for her, bad for him. This is what she thinks because she doesn't know the extraordinary world that well yet. That would be good for her, bad for him. She actually makes, I think, an irreconcilable good choice for herself. It's almost like the prisoner's dilemma. If she turns around, she believes there's about a five-step gap between herself and the man. If she turns around, she believes now that the guy will be behind her instead of in front of her. She believes that at the worst-case scenario, she can run back to the elevator and get there before the guy gets there.

What's great about this crisis is that you can look at it from both sides. Anyway, she makes the choice to act. She chooses to listen to the guy and turn around. That action creates the resolution. The resolution is...

J: The climax is the consequence of her decision that she makes in the crisis and the resolution to that action is that she is now the person trapped on floor 9.5.

SHAWN: Right. When she turns around, the guy flip-flops their position and runs into the elevator. The elevator closes and now she's trapped. I'm sorry, that's not really the resolution of the commercial. That is the resolution from the climax, but the resolution of the story is a new guy comes on the elevator and now she wakes up, and now she has an opportunity to get out of there. Then we cut to black, which is a great tag. If we did not have that tag, meaning that final resolution in the movie, there's something that would have disappointed the viewers. They need the moment to metabolize the story. So that resolution at the very end seems like, "Well, of course." They could have cut that, but they couldn't have. Because if they had, we would have wondered what happens next. My gosh, she's trapped, but now we know. "I get it. This happens over and over and over again."

The metaphor is a great one. The metaphor is when you work late to the point where you become a zombie. Eventually people see you working so late that they think you know something they

don't. They start working late, and then you eventually learn that you don't want to be working late. The whole office scenario, they could have done this at any place. This could have been in an apartment building. It could have been in an elevator at a shopping center. The choice that they made in an office elevator, elevates and provides a lot of meaning to the story, just based upon the choice of setting.

J: Absolutely.

SHAWN: Again, it's just a really tightly spun piece of story that abides to defy the commandments and is a horror story in two minutes.

J: I don't know if this was the intention of the filmmaker or if it's my interpretation, but I thought it also really raised some serious questions at this point in our state of global affairs around the roles of leaders and followers.

SHAWN: Uh, yeah. I'm trying to think what you mean.

J: This idea that the person, what she expected to happen was, she's moving from behind and controlling his movements, which is counterintuitive to what a leader would do.

SHAWN: Yeah, yeah.

J: Maybe just my interpretation, but I thought that was an interesting angle for this little film, too.

SHAWN: Yes, and then the leader sabotages her and selfishly abandons her, once he gets what he wants. Wow, that's good. That's really good. I didn't even catch that.

J: One of the things I drive my wife crazy with, and now my kids are dissecting everything including commercials with *The Story Grid*, and they're good natured about it. But they're like, "We're not writers or filmmakers or screenwriters." Why is this type of story analysis matter to

the average person? Why is this important culturally as opposed to just creatives?

SHAWN: I think you're answered the question by your analysis five seconds ago when you said this also a metaphor for the current state of leadership in the world. The reason why it's really important to understand these five commandments is that if you can understand how people are manipulating you with the story, then you find deeper experience. You find deeper meaning in things that happen to you. When you're watching something as silly as *The Guardians of the Galaxy*, which is a fun superhero movie, when you know *The Story Grid* fundamentals, after a while you sit there and say, "Wow, I guess this story really about this guy maturing and quitting his immature ways and discovering his own inner genius." That guy's inner genius is the ability to lighten up. To really bring things down to almost a comedic level and not being so serious all the time. It's that ability that Peter, I forget what his name is, that really gets him out of a lot of bad situations. He has that ability from the start of the film, but it's not until the end of the film that he actually owns it. He actually says to himself, "I know what to do. This is a great time to distract somebody with frivolity." And he pulls it off.

The more you analyze story, commercials, and things like that, the more you see how media, people, politicians, corporations, how they use stories to get you to view them in a certain light. As I said at the beginning, I have a better feeling about Skittles now. Even though they did not have one piece of candy in this movie, the fact that Skittles says that they are sponsoring these little horror movies, hope you enjoy it, that's enough for me to say, "I'm going to have to buy Halloween candy. I want to see more of those movies. Skittles supports it. I'm going to support Skittles."

Even something as stupid as that affects our behavior. It affects our decision-making ability. For your wife and kids, they might be irritated about it. I guarantee you because you talk about it so much, they are infected with *The Story Grid* virus. They are not going to look at stories, they're not going to surrender to the powers without thinking about them later. I bet after your kids watched it, they thought that was really cool. "I wonder why it was so good? Dad, why do you think it was so good?"

Also, they're going to be able to really be better consumers of story because they're going to call out people. "Oh, I know that thing didn't work." How do you know that? "I just know it because I've been following really good storytelling, and the reason why that didn't work is because it didn't have any resolution. Or the crisis this week. Or the inciting incident was stupid. Or the setting didn't work." All of that stuff, the more you learn about storytelling, the better you'll be able to analyze other people's stories, and then they help you write your own. And help other people write theirs. That's why it's really good, even if you don't care about editing or don't care about writing. To know about the five fundamental, the five commandments of storytelling, is only going to help you see the world in a clearer way.

J: And ultimately make you a better communicator. It just so happens I was listening to Sir Richard Branson being interviewed on a podcast this week. There's this legendary story of him asking Boeing to loan him a jet to start Virgin Atlantic, and they did. It was just an unheard of, unprecedented move. He said, "You don't convince or persuade people with Power Points. You have to tell really good stories." I thought that crystallized the whole moment for me.

SHAWN: Absolutely. Richard Branson is one of the greatest storytellers of the twentieth century and twenty-first century. He starts things that nobody can believe will ever work. Virgin Cola, Virgin Water, Virgin Music Stores, Virgin Records, Virgin Airlines. He just sold that for gobsmacks of money. Steve Jobs was a great storyteller.

The thing about storytellers, and this is my Grand Theory, in order to be a really great storyteller, you have to tell stories to yourself. You have to have vision. What vision is, is to think of something that isn't around yet, and say to yourself, "If somebody were to stop the world and say to me, 'you have as long as you need to create this thing, how would you do it?'" Somebody like Steve Jobs probably said to himself, "What would be the best thing?" This was when he had to take Apple out of three thousand products and bring it down to a core. He probably said to himself, "There's these Walkmans that people really like, but the problem is you can only have one cassette. I wonder what the ideal Walkman would be?" Then he came up with the thousand songs in your pocket. He came up with the idea of you want your whole record collection in a little package. I bet when he had that vision, people were like, "That's nice, Steve, but how are

we going to get a thousand records into a credit card sized thing?" Then he would say that is the vision. Go do it. That's the vision.

Branson is another guy with vision. He says to himself, "I want to run an airline that's fun, that's kind of shagadelic. That 60s, British kind of 'what the hell?' sensibility." And he did it because he, in his mind, knew what it would look like. So all these people who say they don't have any ideas and am not a very good storyteller, think about Ted Williams. Ted's vision was to hit every single ball as hard as he could. "How do I walk back from that?" What he did was look at his own strike zone and he came up with this sixty-four possibilities of the ball being in his strike zone. Then he said to himself, "My hips and the way I swing, I'm not going to be able to hit these balls very well. So I'm going to let those go by and wait for the balls in this area to come to me, and then I'll hit those." He had a vision and then came up with a system to get to his vision. That's storytelling. He told himself a story. "I'm Ted Williams. I want to be the greatest hitter of all time. How do I get from minor league to the greatest hitter of all time?" Then he rocked it back. He thought, "The resolution of my story is that I am the greatest hitter of all time. Where do I get all the other points?"

I could go on and on, but vision is the greatest thing for a storyteller because when you see Valhalla in your mind, you can tell a story to somebody on the fly. I believe one day there will be something like this. There will be a publishing house controlled entirely by the work. That is what a really great storyteller does. He says, "When I think of a story, I want to think of the final thing. What's my final thing? What is the thing at the end of the rainbow? Then I'll start telling a story of how I am going to get there." The beauty of story and humanity is that your brain, knowing the resolution, the ending payoff, will fill in the blanks for you. You don't have to think. Just let your brain move forward and it will. The muse will come to you. If you have a vision, the muse descends upon you, and yet, you're going to go down blind alleys and make mistakes, your vision might not work. But you will find a way to get there.

J: Awesome. That's a great way to finish our conversation. I want to sincerely thank you for taking the time to indulge me in this two-minute horror film. It was absolutely enlightening, and I'm just thrilled you were able to do it for me. Thank you so much.

SHAWN: It was my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

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