

Lecture 25

Storytelling

Some Questions to Start With

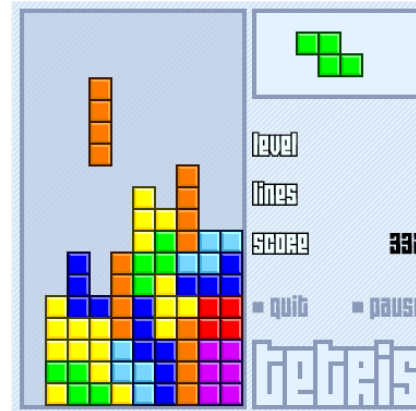
- What is the purpose of story in game?
- How do story and gameplay relate?
- Do all games have to have a story?
 - Role playing games?
 - Action games?

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 - Role playing games?
 - Action games?
 - Sports games?
 - Puzzle games?



Aspects of Game Design

- Games as **Exploration**
 - Focuses on the game geography
 - Typically involves heavy storyboarding
- Games as **Education**
 - Train player skill and understanding
 - Focuses primarily on player capabilities
- **Games as Storytelling**
 - Focuses on player progression
 - Most challenging element of game design

Setting vs. Story

Setting

- Premise/motivation to play
 - Does not limit outcomes
 - “Geography” to explore
- Has many “dimensions”
 - Physical (scale, perspective)
 - Temporal (time compression)
 - Environmental (art style)
 - Emotional (horror, humor)
 - Ethical (good vs. evil)

Story

- Creates an emotional setting
 - Defined by NPC behavior
 - Drama builds tension
- Typically has a **narrative**
 - “Voice” of the author
 - Gives direction to game
 - Gives sense of progression
 - But loss of **player choice**

Setting: Physical Dimension

- Is your game 2-D or 3-D?
 - Even if graphics 3-D, may have 2-D gameplay
 - Could you have other dimensions (1-D, 4-D)?
- What is the scale of objects?
 - Is the scale an abstraction or realistic?
 - How does that affect gameplay?
- What are your boundaries?
 - What can the player interact with?

Setting: Physical Dimension



Setting: Temporal Dimension

- Does time move at a consistent pace?
 - Are real time games actually real-time?
 - Can the player adjust time?
- Narrative compression
 - Reduce time for “unimportant details”
 - Walking across a large map
 - Training to go up a level
 - Keeps the player from being bored

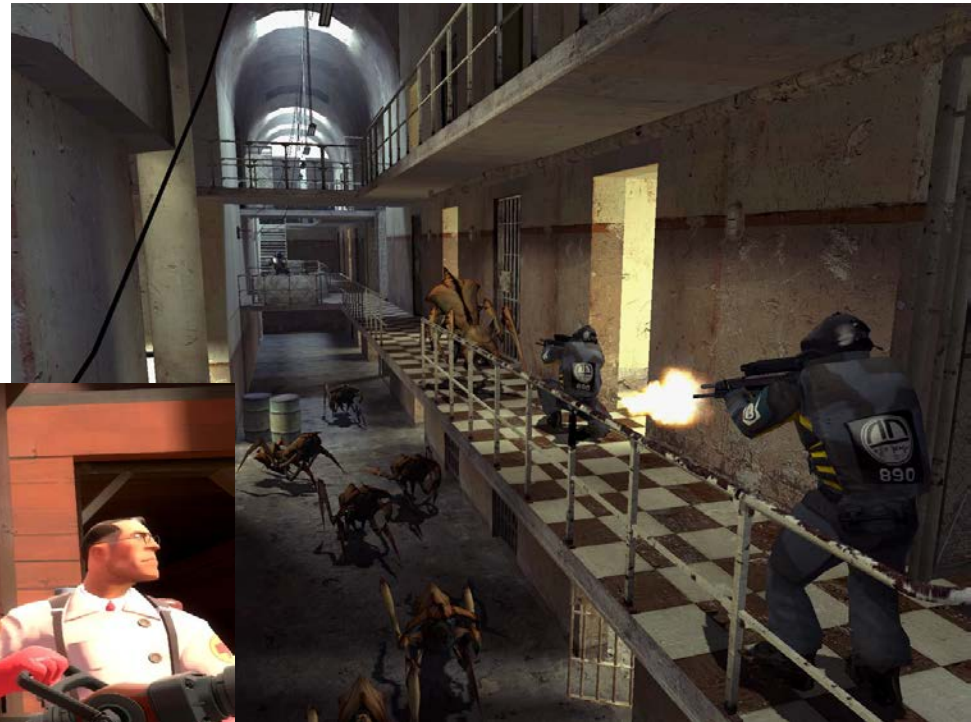
Setting: Temporal Dimension



Setting: Environmental Dimension

- Reflects mood and tone of your game
 - Includes (possibly fictional) cultural setting
- Style of your physical surroundings
 - Is it photorealistic or illustrative?
 - Music and environment sounds?
- Includes level of detail
 - How much control do you have over objects?
 - Realism versus *meaningful* abstraction

Setting: Environmental Dimension



Setting vs. Story

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Travelogues are a Kind of Story

- Focus is on **journey**, not the characters
- Many examples in **literature**
 - *Gulliver's Travels*
 - Classic heroic myths (e.g. Odyssey)
 - Epic fantasy (e.g. Tolkien)
- Problem is the **emotional impact**
 - One landmark is as good as any other
 - Eventually landmarks lose their significance

Travelogues in RPGs



Story and Gameplay

- Want to create dramatic tension in the game
 - Heightens emotional investment
 - Story becomes integral part of gameplay
- Story structure is incredibly important
 - **Pacing:** How elements unfold in the game
 - **Dramatic Flow:** Rising and falling action
- How do we structure this?
 - And how does it affect meaningful choice?

Story Vehicle

- The **dynamic structure**

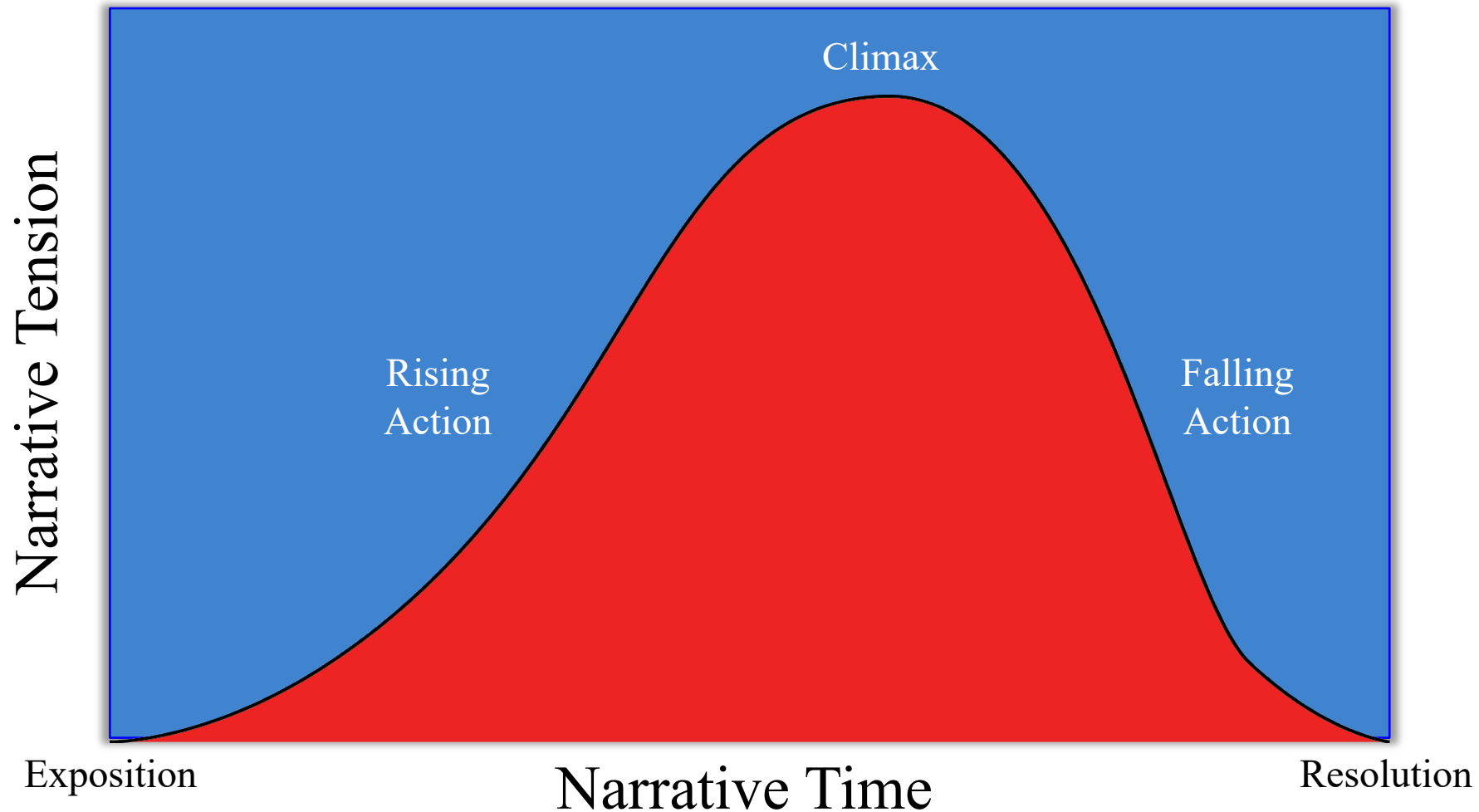
- How is story revealed.
- Relation to gameplay?
- Can story be “missed”?

- **Examples:**

- Cut-scenes
- Character dialog
- In-game lore
- Game manual



The Dramatic Arc



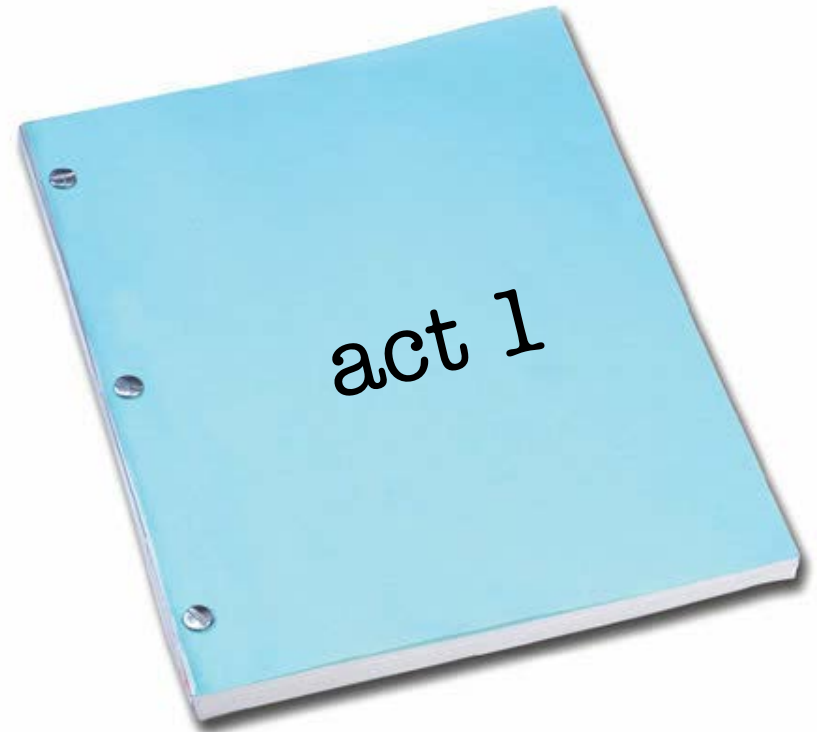
Three Act Structure

- Standard for movie screenplays
 - All major movies follow it
 - Violations consider “artsy”
 - Proven formula for dramatic arc
- Accepted standard for games too
 - But less well understood
 - Suitableness is matter of debate



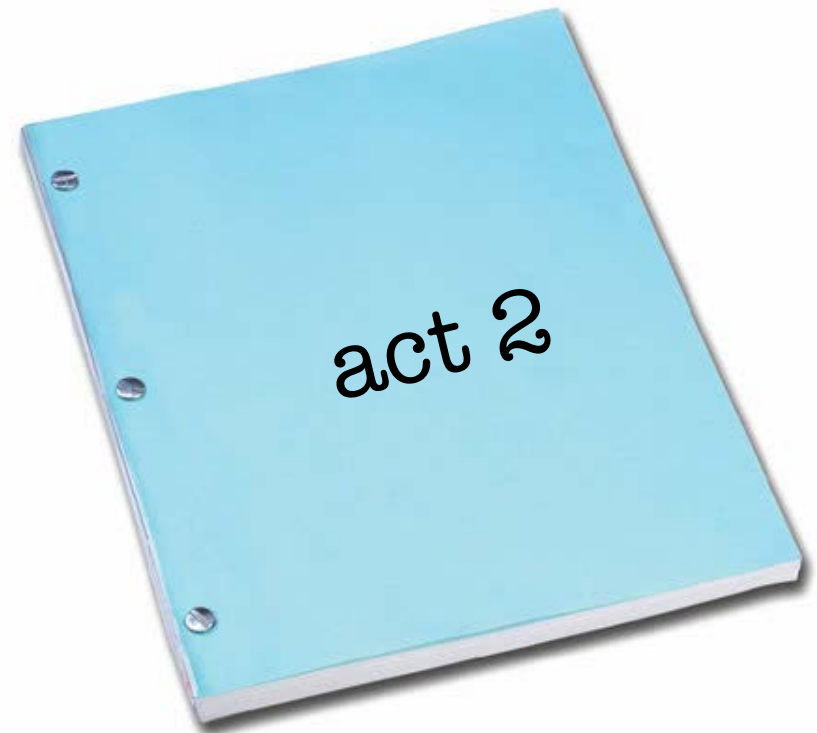
Act I: Set-Up

- **Exposition**
 - Introduces the protagonist
 - Introduces dramatic premise
 - Character relationships
- **Inciting Incident**
 - Sets the plot in motion
 - Half-way through act
- **Plot Point**
 - Indicates end of the act
 - “Reversal”: new direction



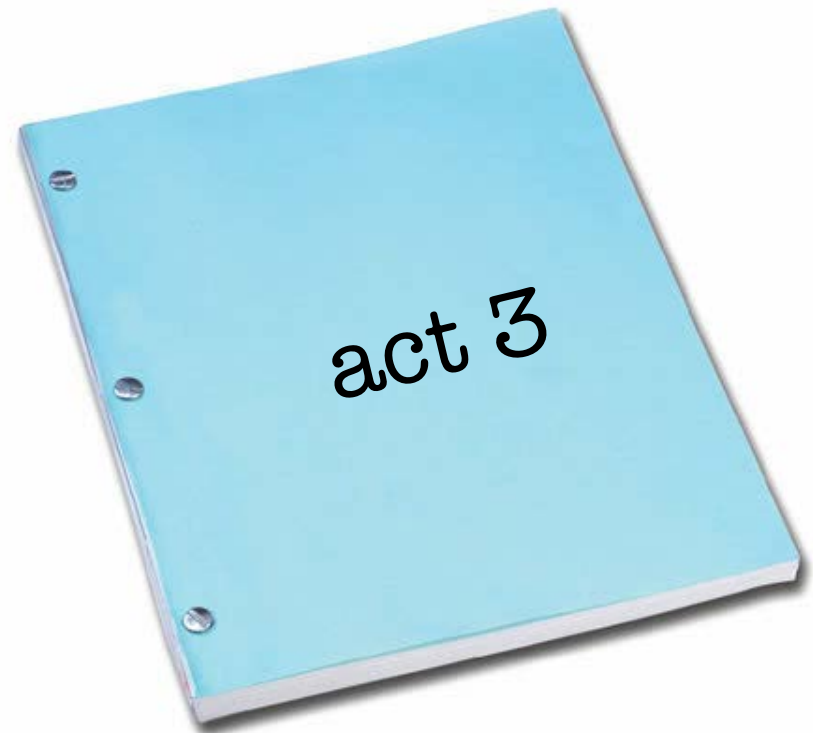
Act 2: Confrontation

- Obstacles block goal
- **First Culmination**
 - Just before halfway point
 - Protagonist seems close
 - Then everything falls apart
- **Midpoint**
 - Protagonist at lowest point
- **Plot Point**
 - Indicates end of the act
 - “Reversal”: new direction



Act 3: Resolution

- **Second Culmination**
 - Tension at greatest point
 - Forces confront each other
 - Often called “Climax”
- **Denouement**
 - After climax is done
 - Return to equilibrium
- Typically much shorter
 - In games: the boss fight

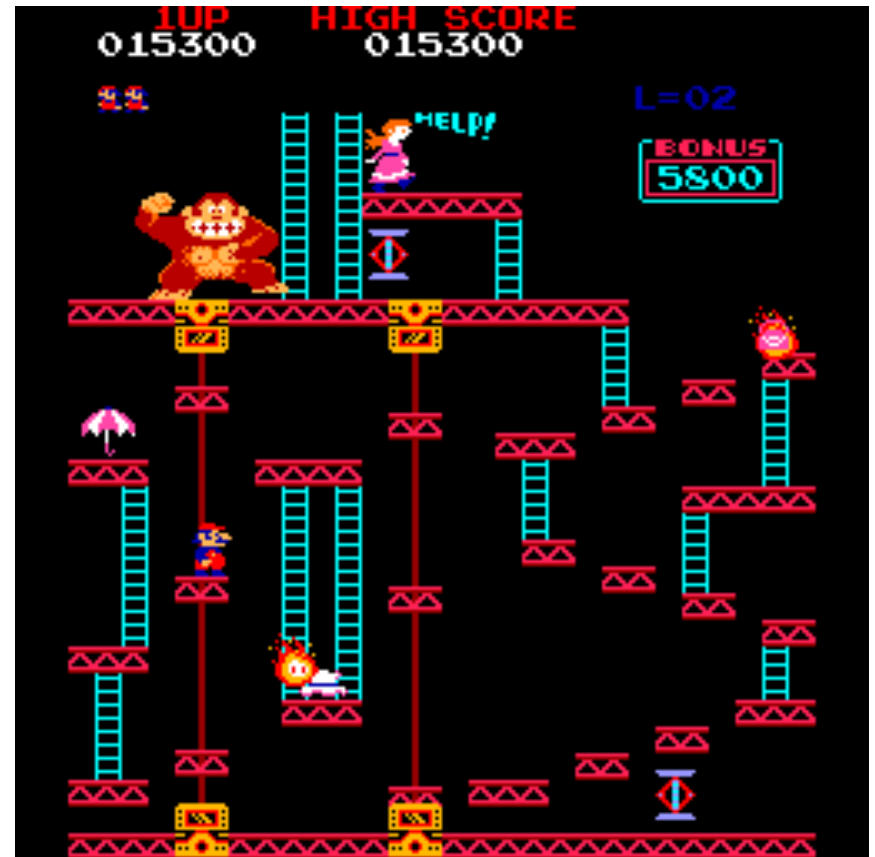


Example: *Donkey Kong*

Exposition, Act I



Rising Action, Act II

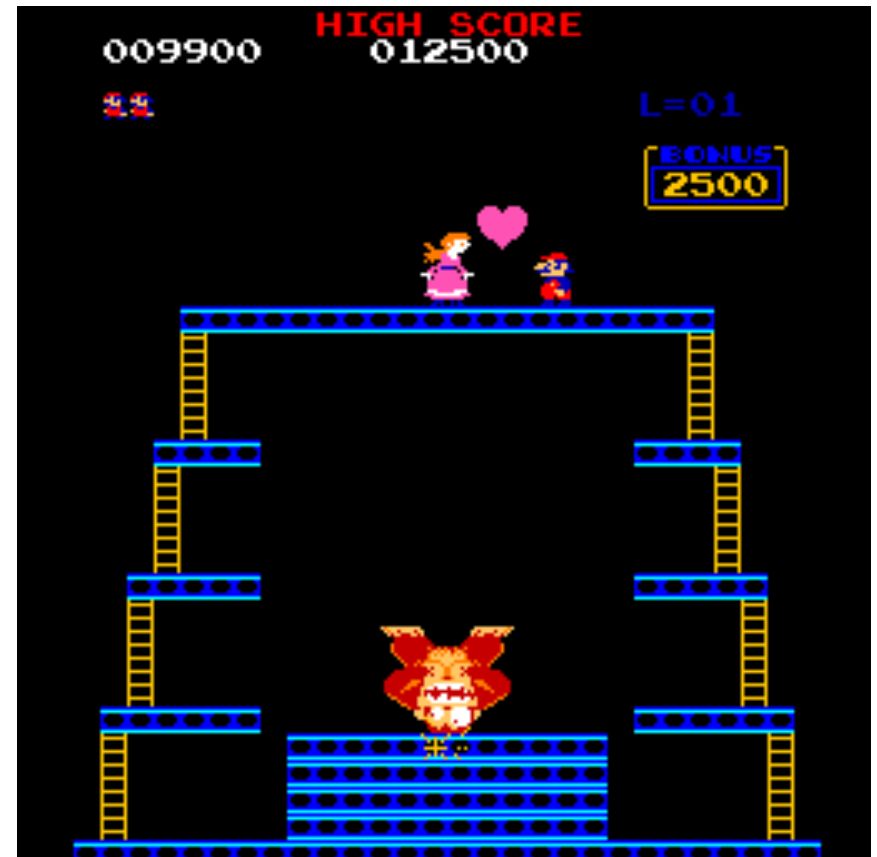


Example: *Donkey Kong*

Climax, Act III



Denouement



Gameplay vs. Narrative

- **Narrative:** non-interactive
 - Designer created narrative
 - Player experiences it
 - Even if there are choices
- **Gameplay:** interactive
 - Very definition of a game
 - Entirely player driven
- How do you combine these?



Elements of Game Narrative

- **Characters**

- Protagonist: player controlled character
- Supporting characters: NPCs

- **Storyline**

- How does the story progress?

- **Dialogue**

- Story vehicle in games and fiction
- Easy way to allow player choice

Elements of Game Narrative

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- **Dialogue**

- ...
 - ...
- For a later lecture
- ... action
- ... player choice

Characters: Agency vs. Empathy

- Like gameplay vs. narrative dichotomy
- **Agency**: Character represents the player
 - Can be utilitarian (allowing player choice)
 - Can support role playing, creativity
- **Empathy**: Develop emotional bond
 - Hard if complete player control
 - Requires some predefined personality

Characters vs. Avatars

Character

Avatar



Characters vs. Avatars

Character

Avatar



How Does this Effect the Story?

Computer vs. Player Control

Computer Control

Player Control



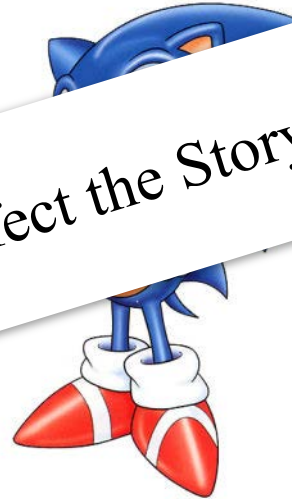
Computer vs. Player Control

Computer Control

Player Control

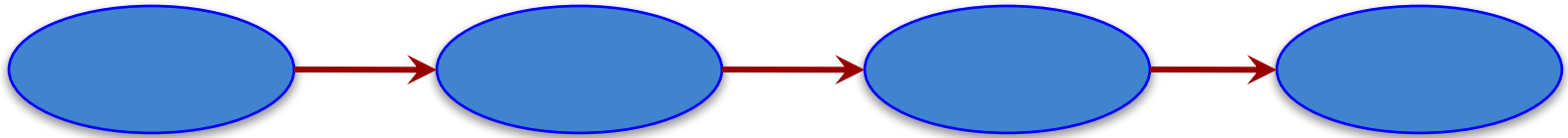


How Does this Effect the Story?

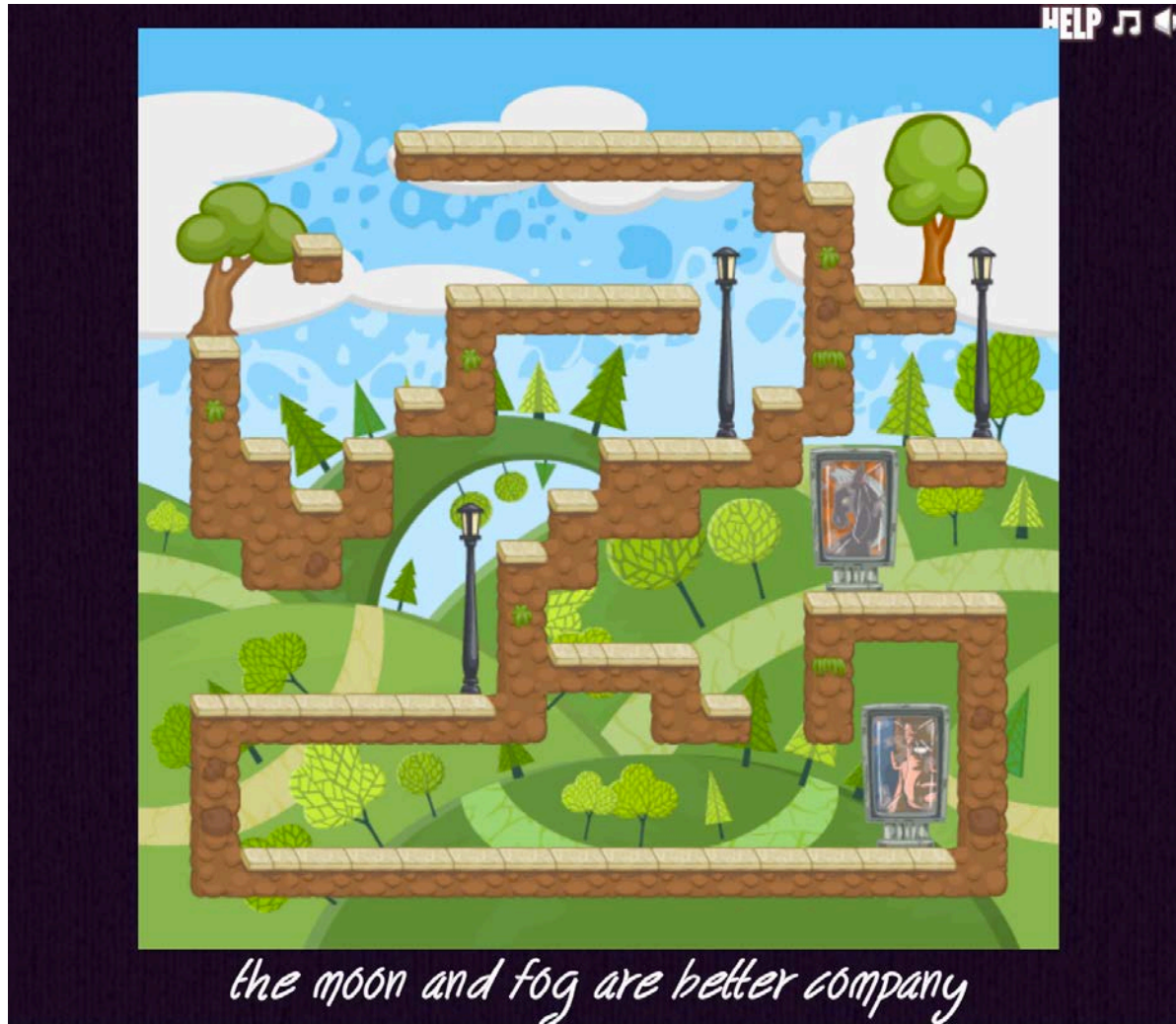


Storyline

- **Linear Storytelling:** Designer directed
 - Success is adherence to story
 - Very easy to design (cutscenes!)



Example: *Fracture 2*



Example: *I Saw Her Standing There*

i loved her but she was a zombie.
so i put her safe in a cage.



Example: *I Saw Her Standing There*

i loved her but she was a zombie.

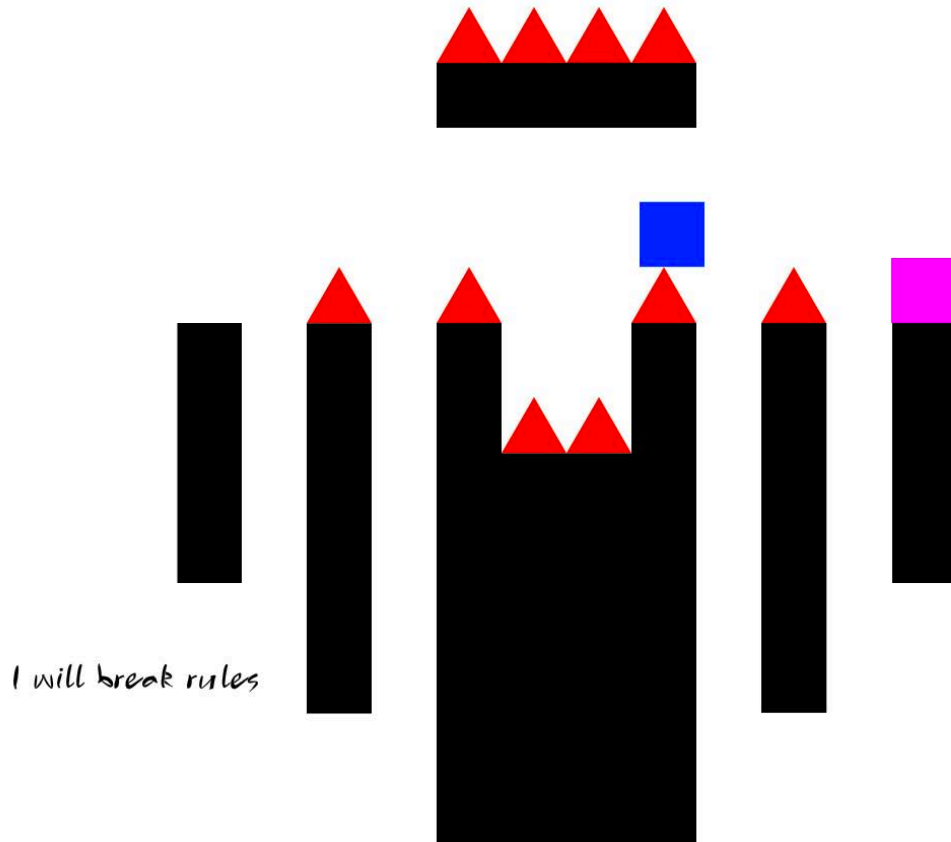
so i put her safe in a cage.

Storyline acts as a tutorial, guiding us through the mechanics.



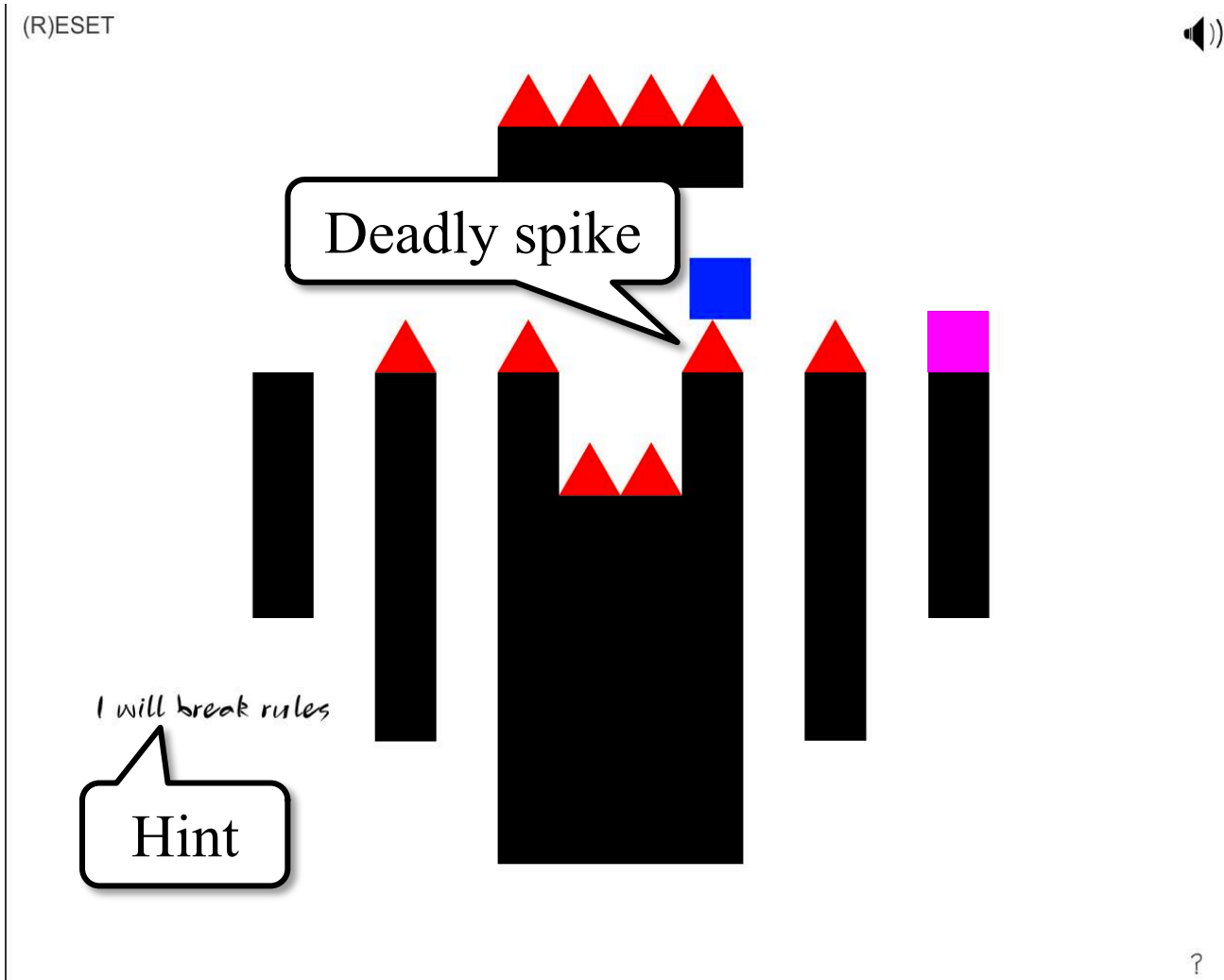
Going Meta: *Pretentious Game*

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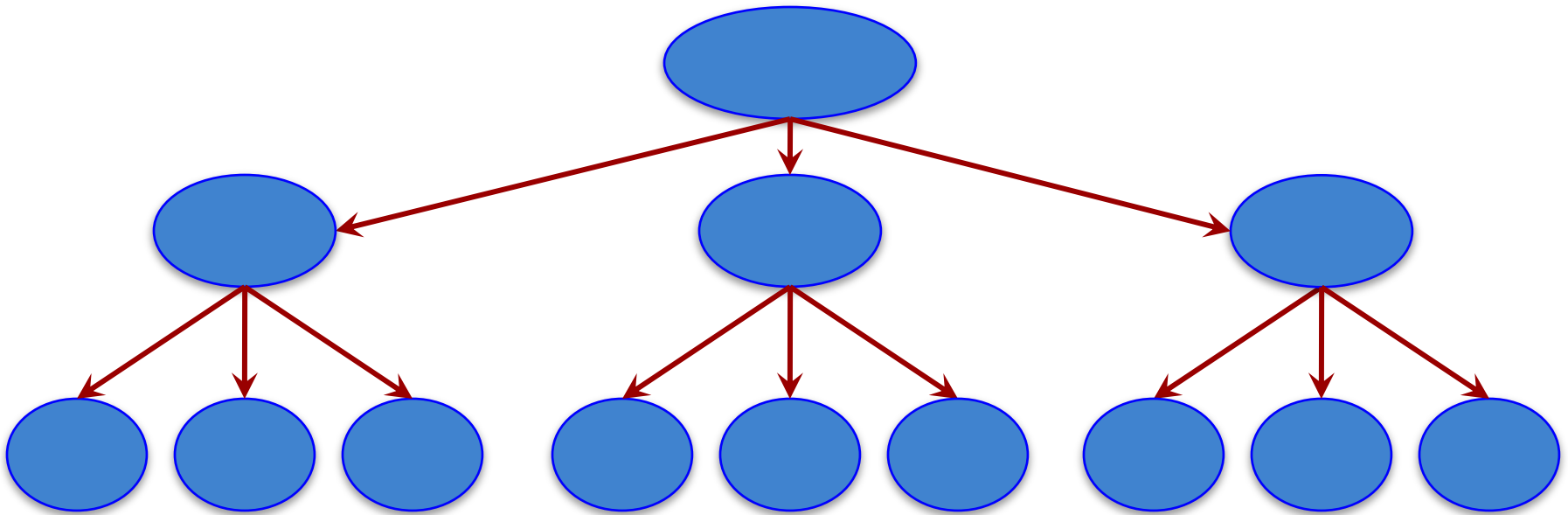
?

Going Meta: *Pretentious Game*



Storyline

- **Branching Storytelling:** Player directed
 - *Choose Your Own Adventure*
 - Content becomes very expensive!



Example: Storyteller



Can move characters in each timeline

Affects state in other timelines

Example: Today I Die

Can replace words in the poem



dead
dark world
full of shades
today I die

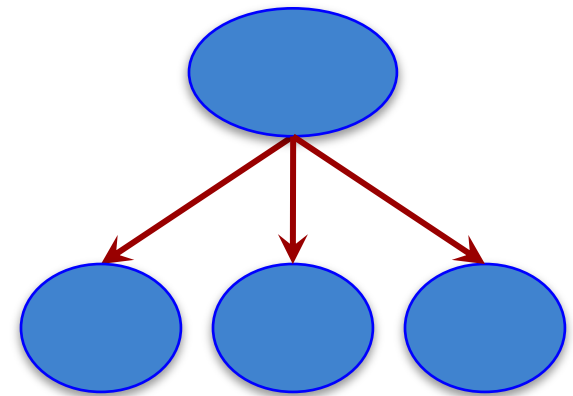
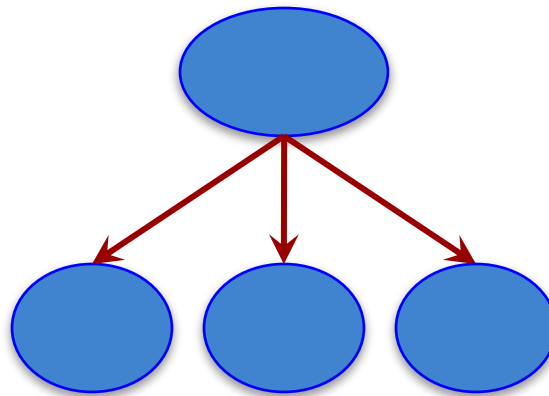
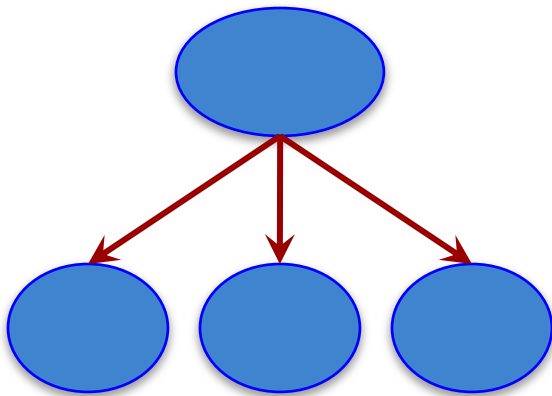
painful

Affects state of the world

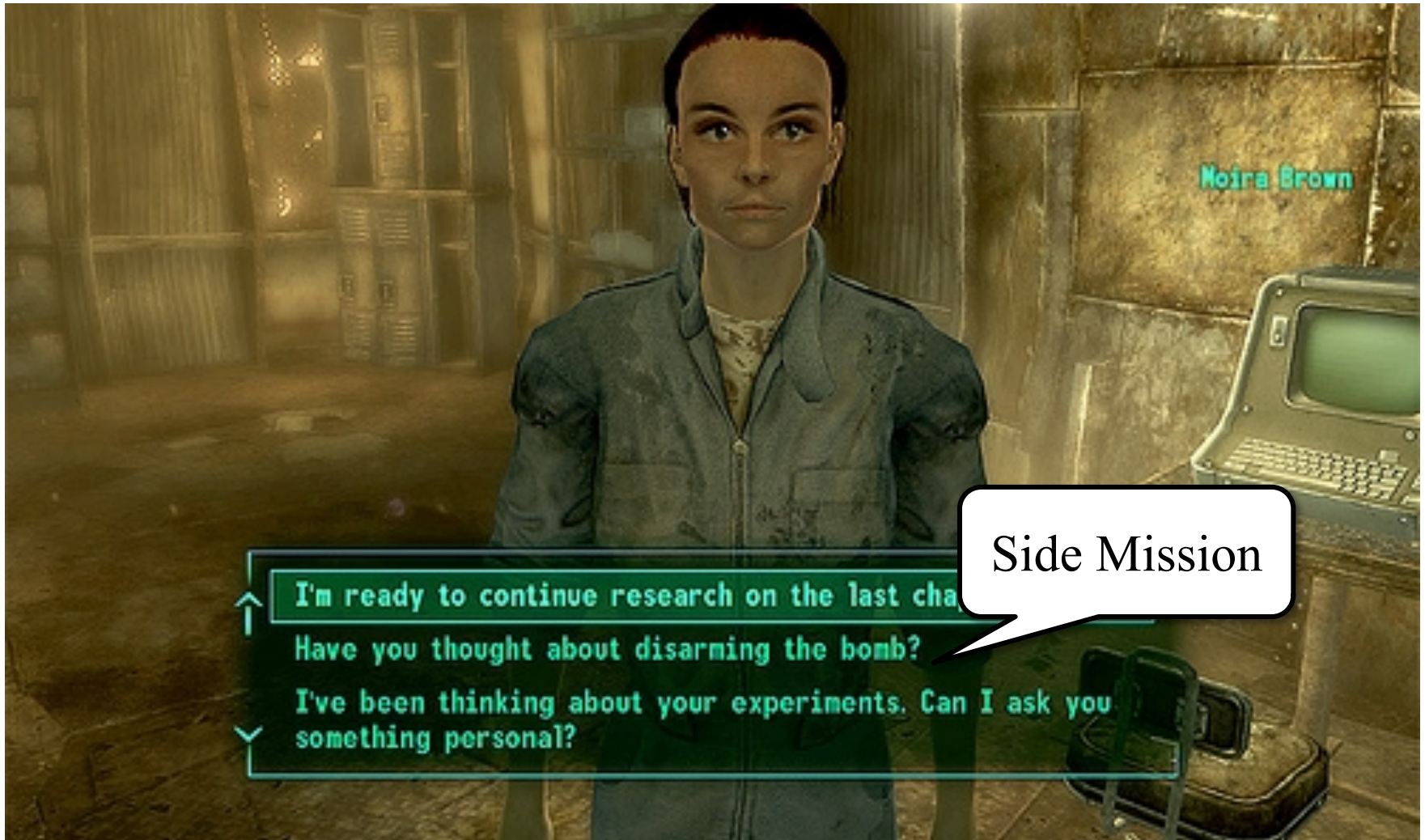
Used to be on App store. No longer available

Storyline

- **Component Design:** Dialogue heavy games
 - Game has “components” each with different story
 - Simple branching story per component
 - Player’s story is a mix-and-match of components



Component Design: Quests



Storyline

- **Open Ended:** Player creates own story



Storyline

- **Open Ended:** Player creates own story



Meaningful Choice

- Players often claim want meaningful choice
 - Gameplay actions have effect on storyline
 - Actions needed to achieve story outcomes
 - Must make some outcomes unattainable (why?)
- But not clear that they **mean** this
 - Often want to experience *all* of the story
 - Closing off plotlines requires a new game
 - *Morrowind* vs. *Obsidian*

Summary

- Story can simply support a setting
 - Can tell across multiple vehicles
 - Does not require it be coupled with gameplay
- Integrating **narrative** with gameplay is harder
 - **Character design**: agency vs. empathy
 - **Storyline**: linear vs. branching vs. other
 - **Dialogue**: **next time**
- **Authorial voice** is possible without narrative