Lecture 26

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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Some Questions to Start With

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Some Questions to Start With

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- Do all games have to have a story?
  - Role playing games?
  - Action games?
  - Sports games?
  - Puzzle games?

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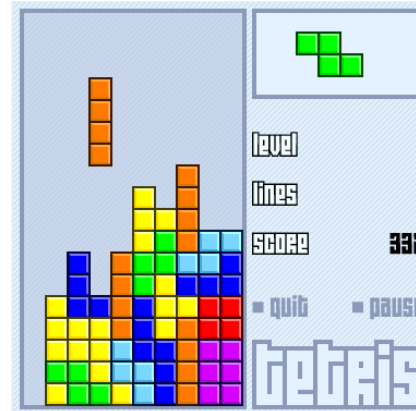
Aspects of Game Design

- 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
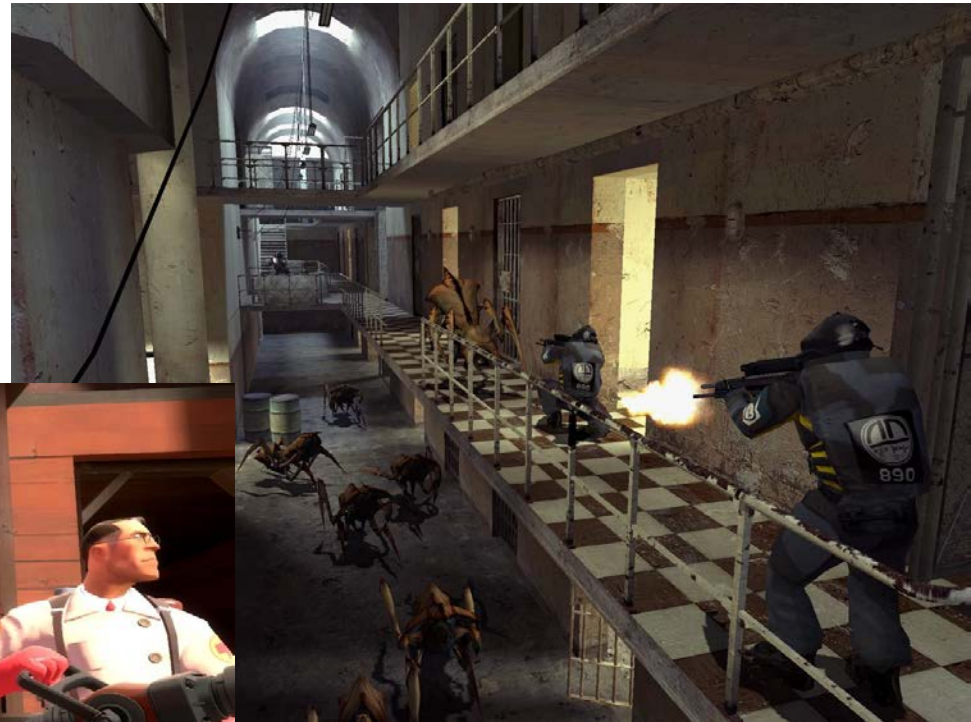
Setting vs. Story

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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

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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?

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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

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The Dramatic Arc

Narrative Tension — Narrative Time

Climax

Rising Action

Falling Action

Exposition

Resolution

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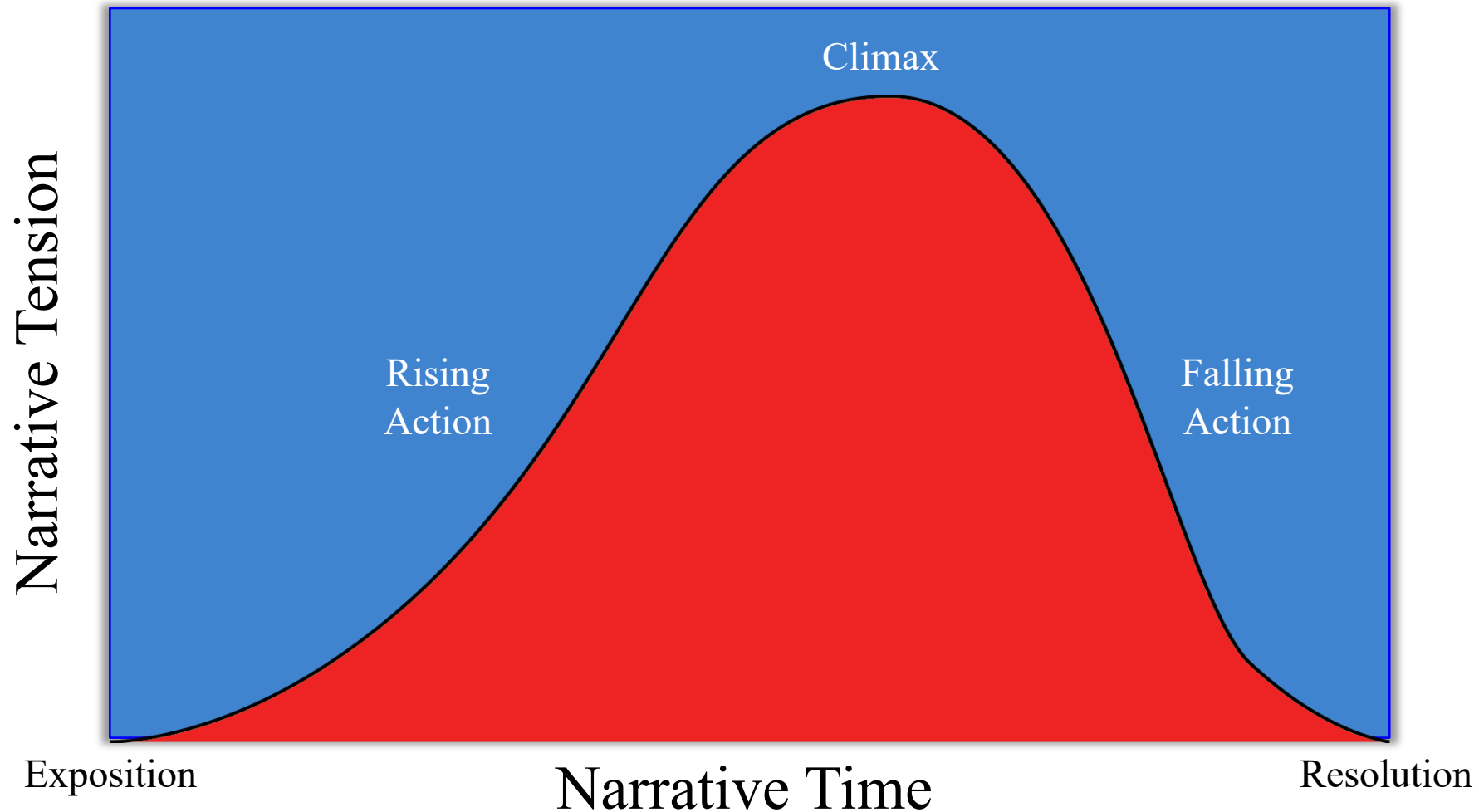
Three Act Structure

- 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

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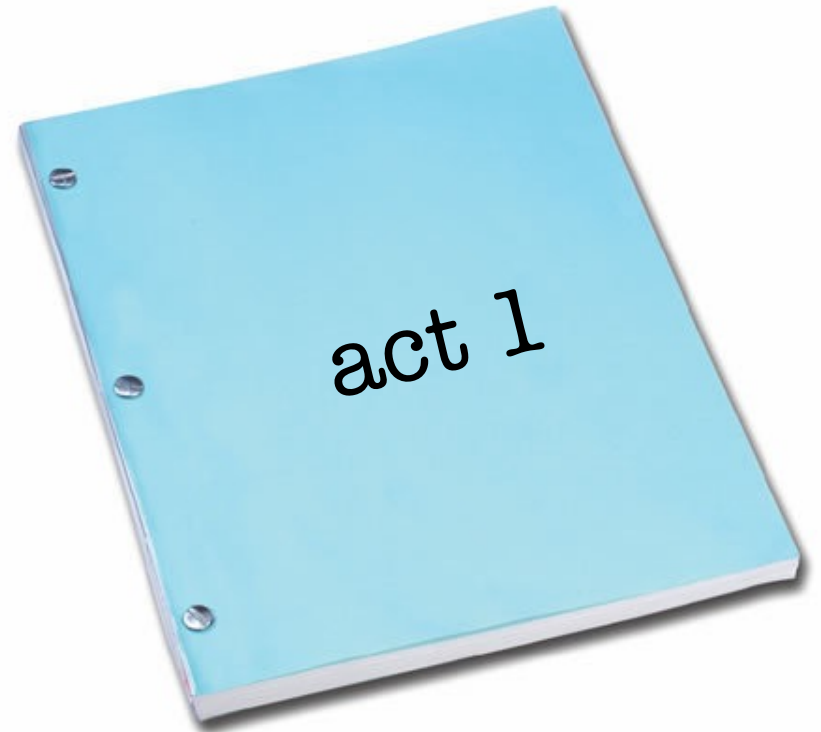
Act 2: Confrontation

- 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 2
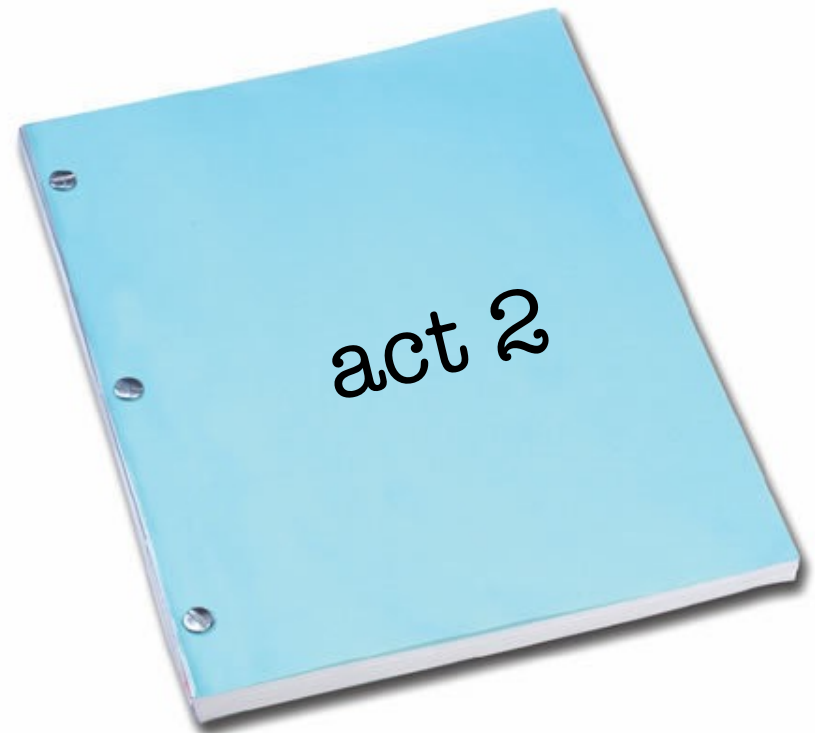
Act 3: Resolution

- **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

act 3

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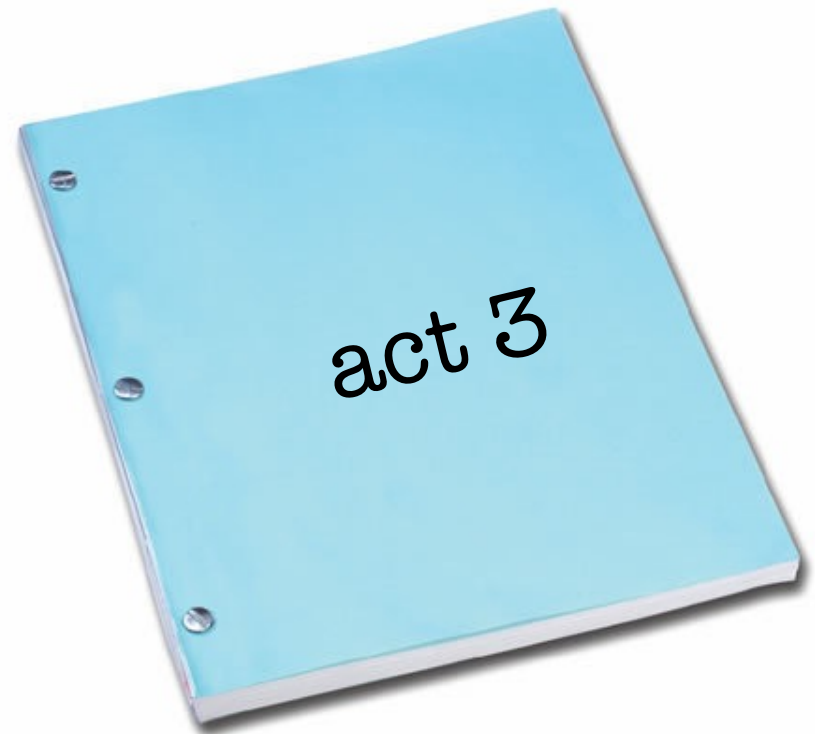
Example: *Donkey Kong*

Exposition, Act I

Rising Action, Act II

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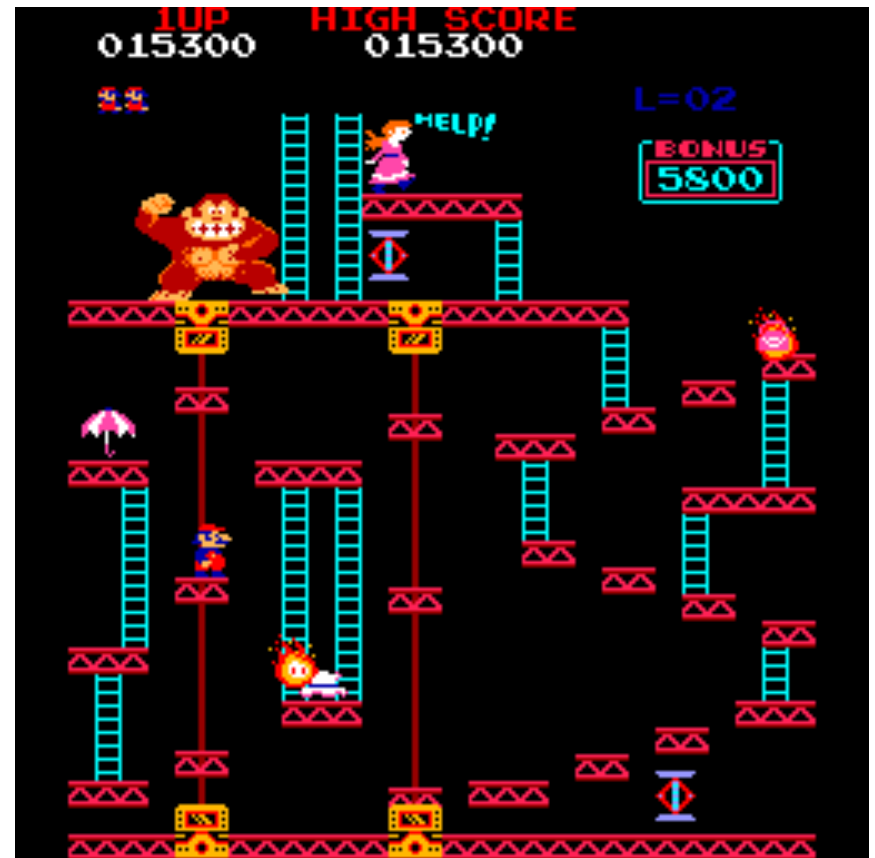
Example: *Donkey Kong*

Climax, Act III

Denouement

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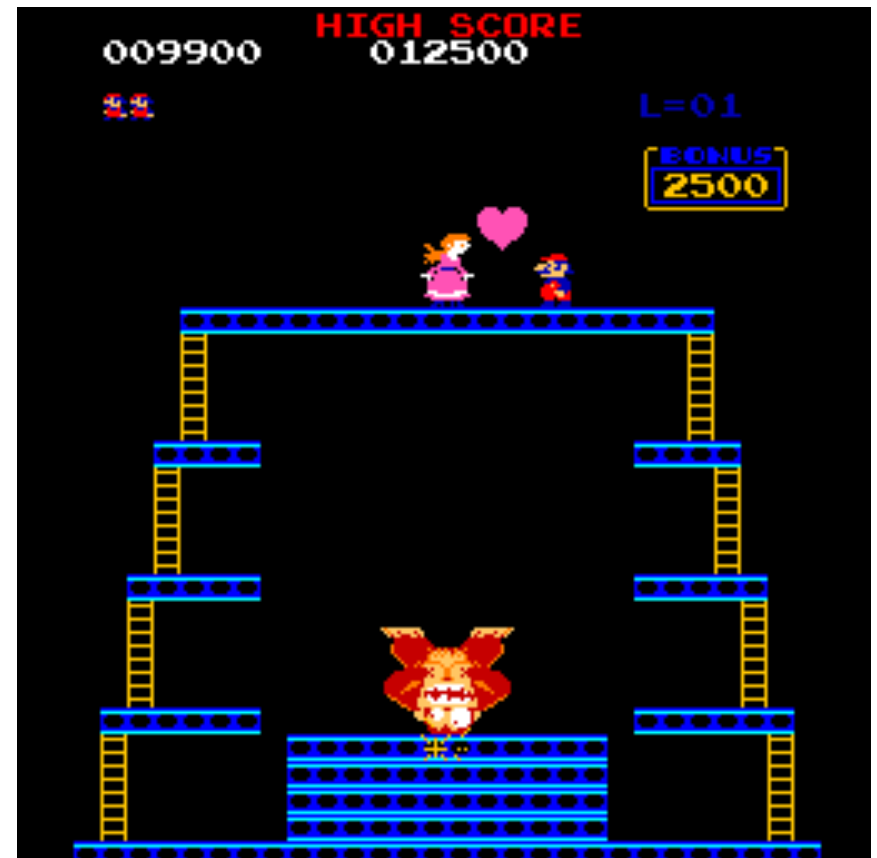
Gameplay vs. Narrative

- **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?

Fai Dan: Looks like a dozen. Maybe more.
Can I help?
What's going on?
Only a dozen?

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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

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Elements of Game Narrative

- ## Characters

  - Protagonist: player controlled character
  - Supporting characters: NPCs

- ## Storyline

  - How does the story progress?

- ## Dialogue

  - S̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶̶ction
  - p̶l̶a̶y̶e̶r̶ choice

For a later lecture

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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

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Characters vs. Avatars

Character   Avatar

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Characters vs. Avatars

Character ←————————————————→ Avatar

How Does this Effect the Story?

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Computer vs. Player Control

Computer Control ←→ Player Control

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Computer vs. Player Control

Computer Control

Player Control

How Does this Effect the Story?

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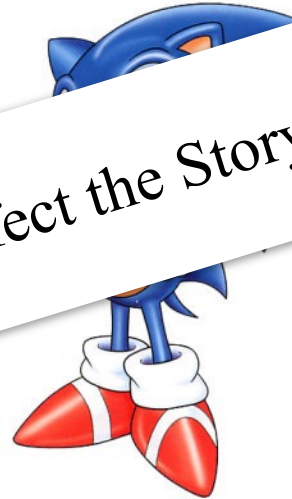
Storyline

- **Linear Storytelling**: Designer directed

    - Success is adherence to story

    - Very easy to design (cutscenes!)

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Example: *Fractured 2*

Interactive Storytelling

Example: *I Saw Her Standing There*

Interactive Storytelling

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*

Interactive Storytelling

Going Meta: *Pretentious Game*

Storyline

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

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Example: *Storyteller*

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Example: *Storyteller*

Can move characters in each timeline

Affects state in other timelines

Interactive Storytelling

Example: *Today I Die*

Storytelling

Example: *Today I Die*

Can replace words in the poem
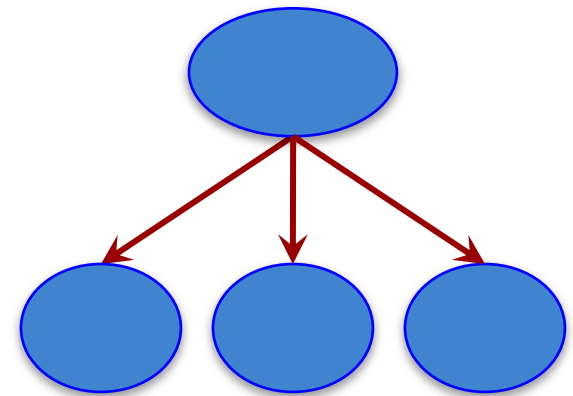
Affects state of the world

Used to be on App store. No longer available

Interactive Storytelling

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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

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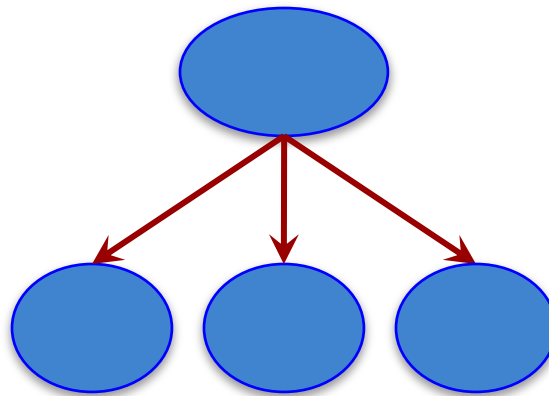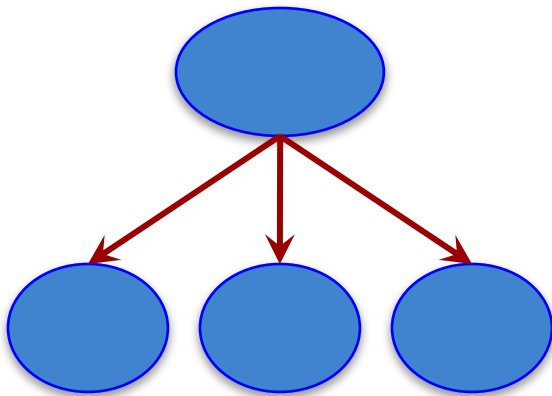
Component Design: Quests

Side Mission

I'm ready to continue research on the last cha

Have you thought about disarming the bomb?

I've been thinking about your experiments. Can I ask you something personal?

Moira Brown

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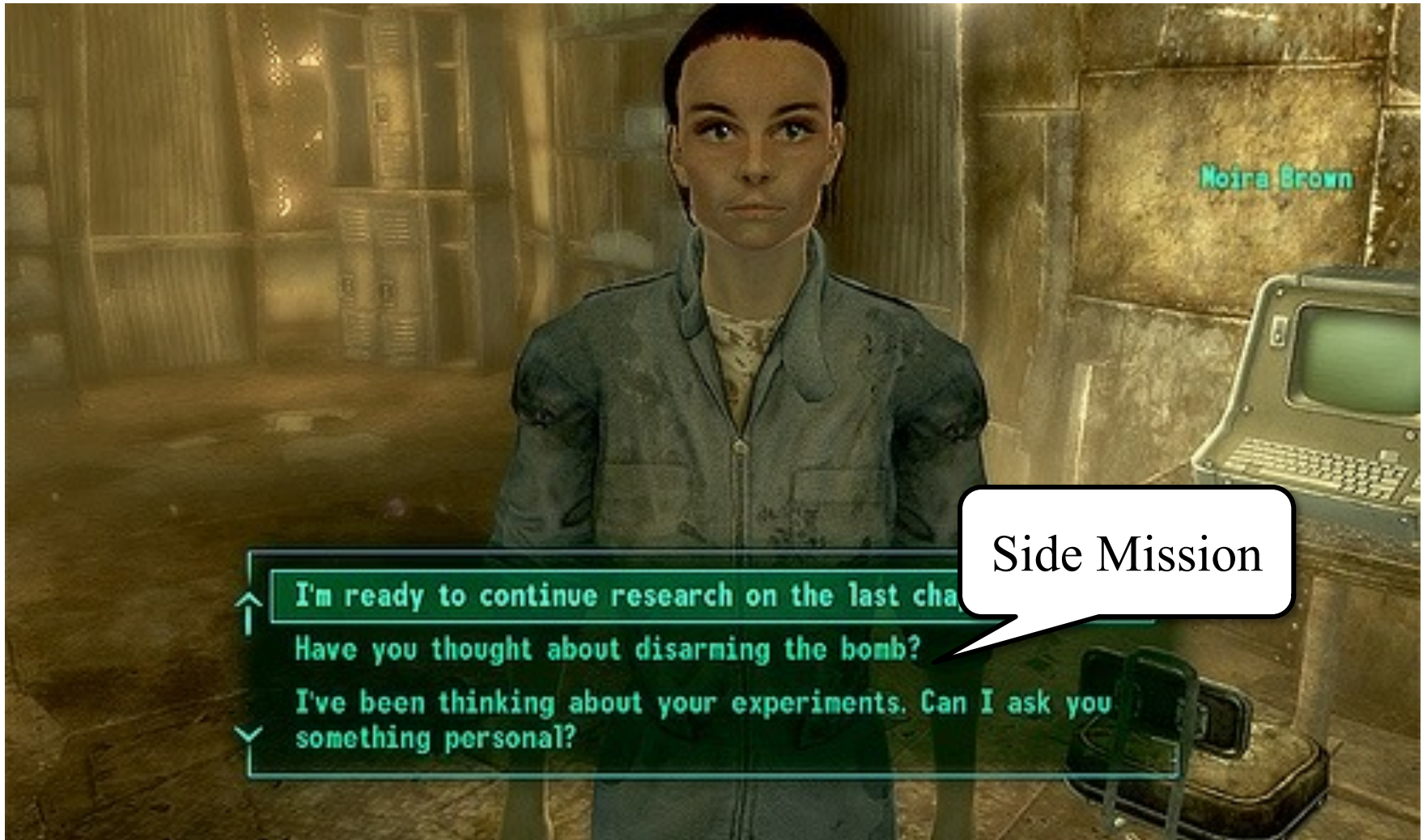
Storyline

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

?

Storyline

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

No Narrative: Is this Really Storytelling?

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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*

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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