

## Lecture 26

# Storytelling

# Some Questions to Start With

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- 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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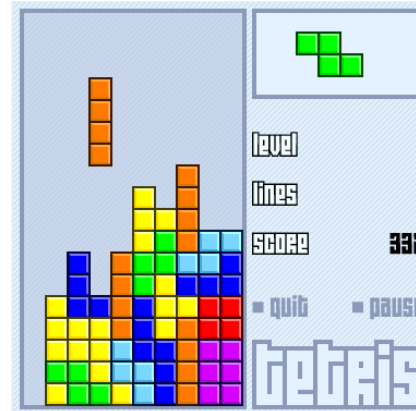
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  - Sports games?

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



# Aspects of Game Design

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- 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

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## Setting

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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# Setting: Temporal Dimension

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- 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

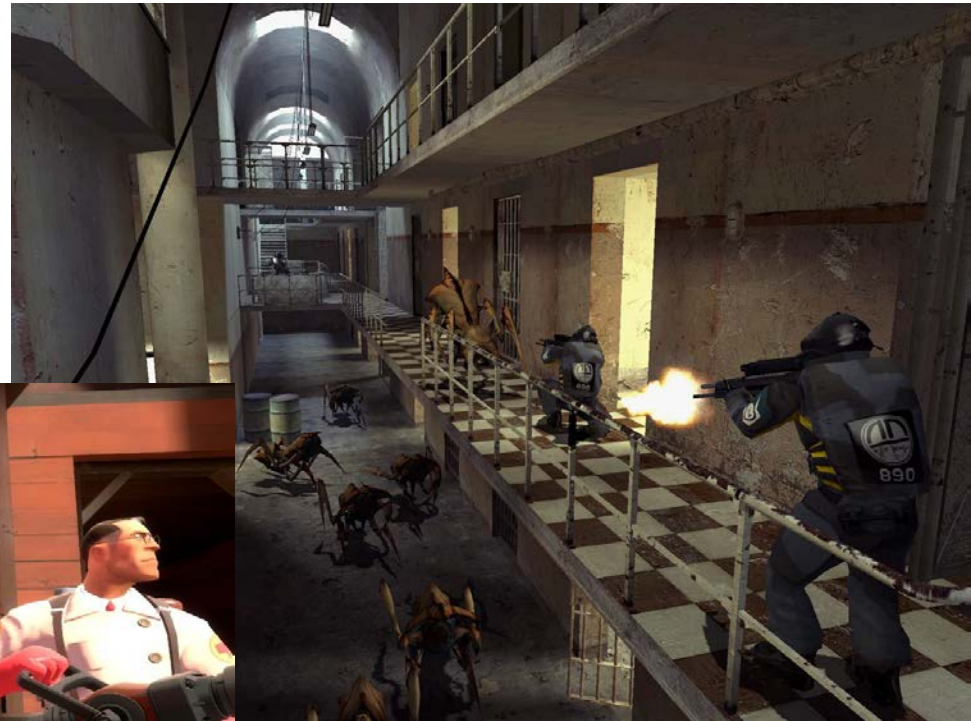
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- Reflects mood and tone of your game
  - Includes (possibly fictional) cultural setting
- Style of your physical surroundings
  - Is it photorealistic or illustrative?
  - Music and environment sounds?
- Includes level of detail
  - How much control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



# Setting: Environmental Dimension

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# Setting vs. Story

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# Travelogues are a Kind of Story

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- 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

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- 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**

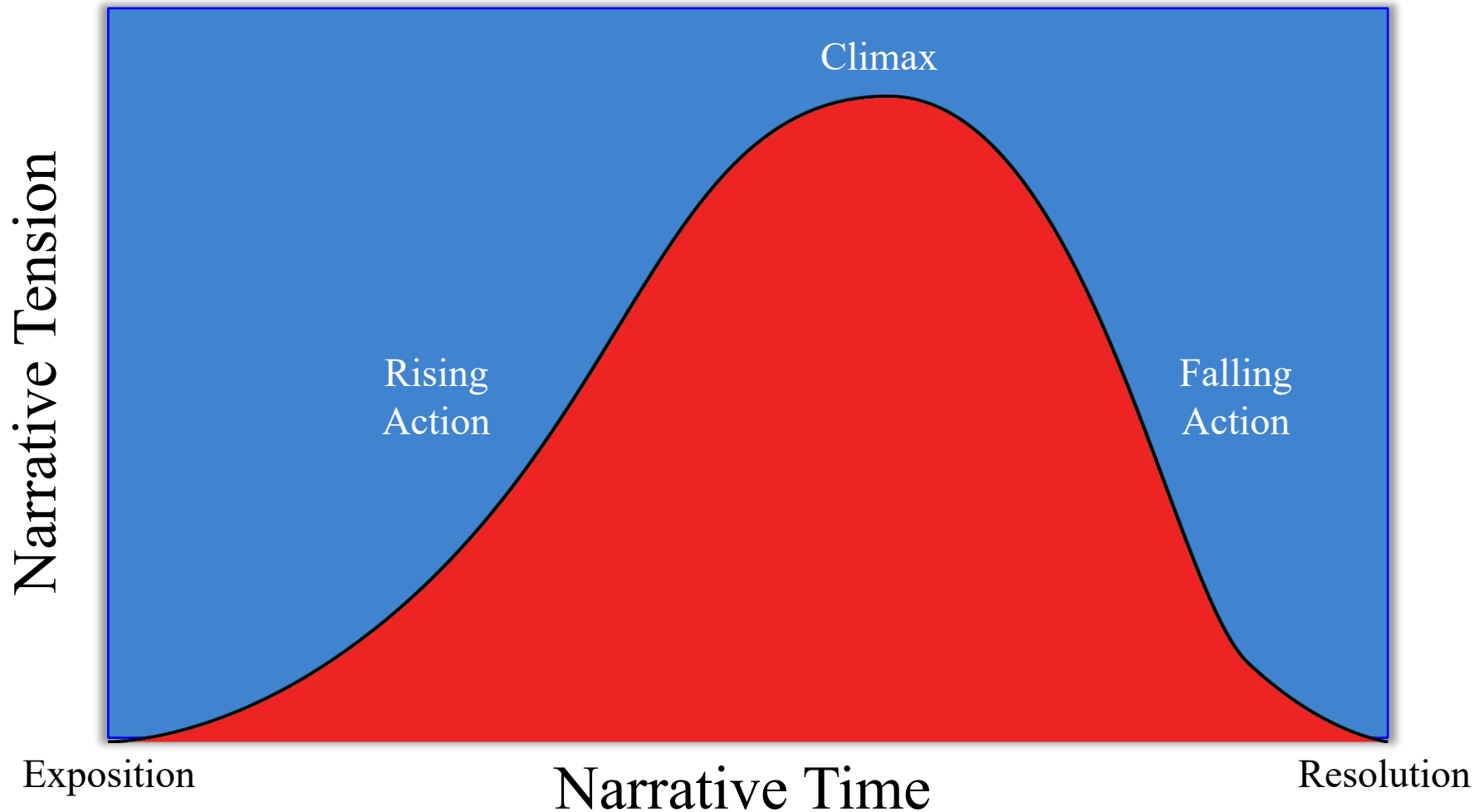
- How is story revealed.
- Relation to gameplay?
- Can story be “missed”?

- **Examples:**

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



# The Dramatic Arc



# Three Act Structure

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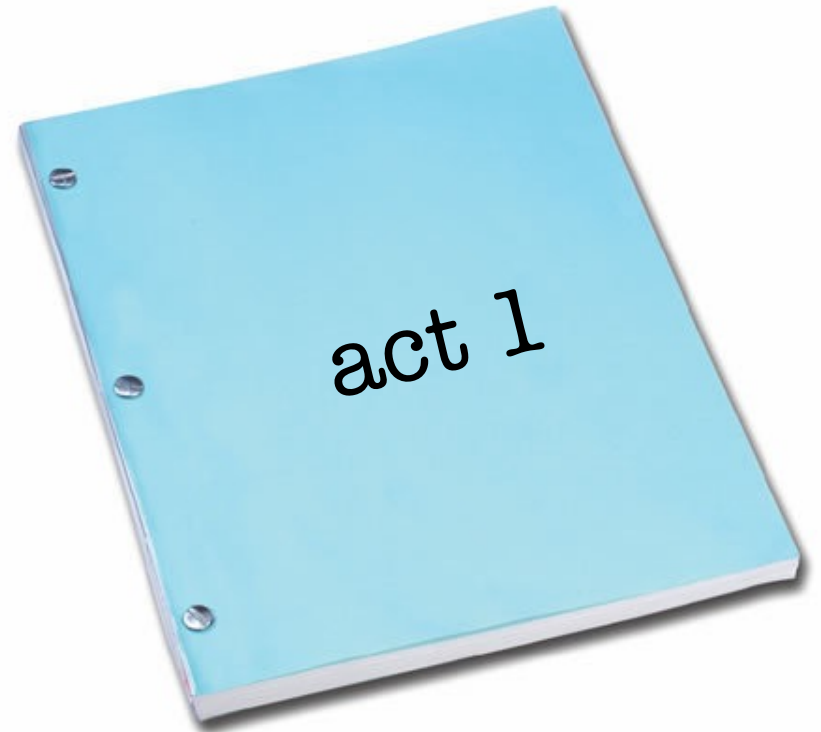
- Standard for movie screenplays
  - All major movies follow it
  - Violations consider “artsy”
  - Proven formula for dramatic arc
- Accepted standard for games too
  - But less well understood
  - Suitableness is matter of debate



# Act I: Set-Up

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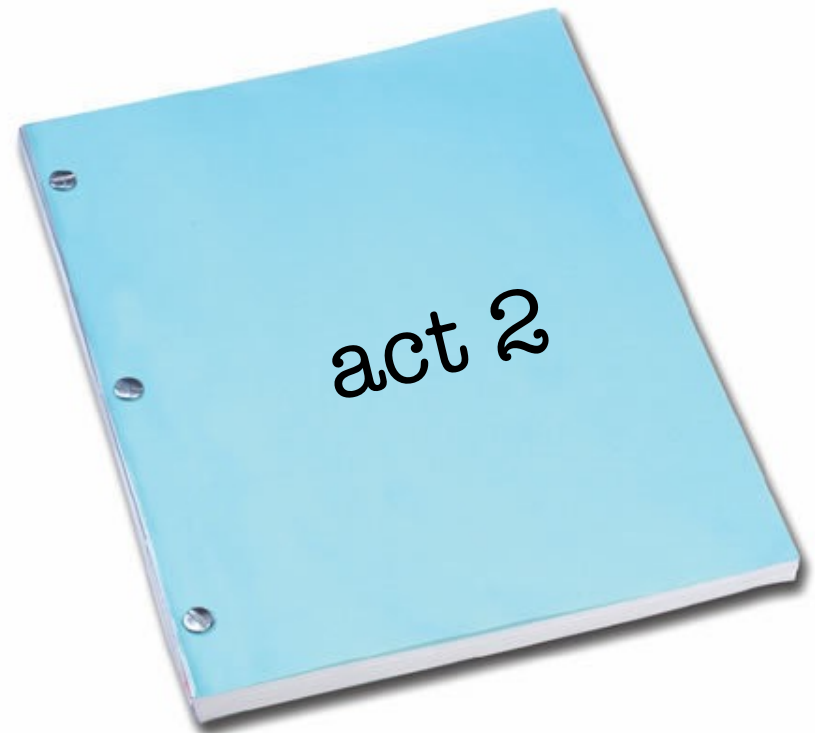
- **Exposition**
  - Introduces the protagonist
  - Introduces dramatic premise
  - Character relationships
- **Inciting Incident**
  - Sets the plot in motion
  - Half-way through act
- **Plot Point**
  - Indicates end of the act
  - “Reversal”: new direction



# Act 2: Confrontation

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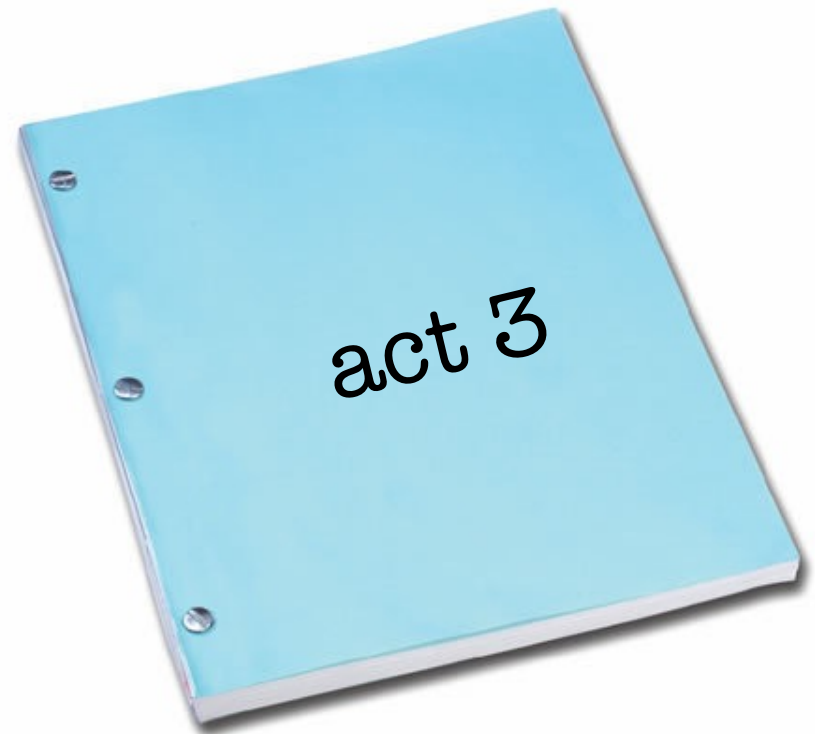
- Obstacles block goal
- **First Culmination**
  - Just before halfway point
  - Protagonist seems close
  - Then everything falls apart
- **Midpoint**
  - Protagonist at lowest point
- **Plot Point**
  - Indicates end of the act
  - “Reversal”: new direction



# Act 3: Resolution

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- **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

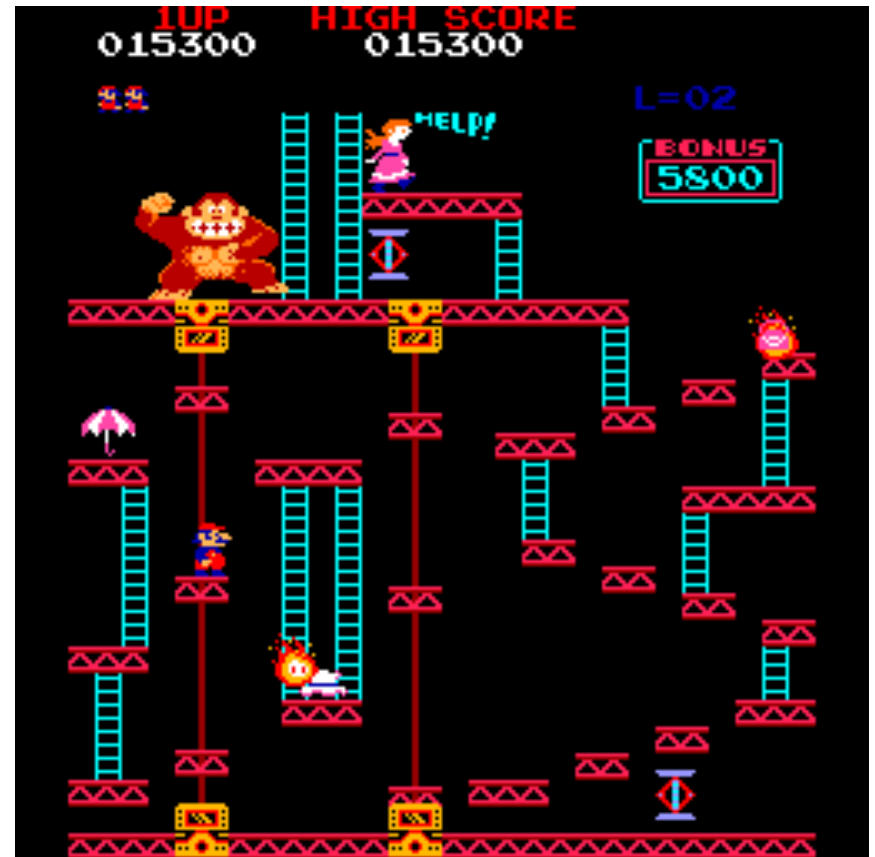


# Example: *Donkey Kong*

## Exposition, Act I



## Rising Action, Act II

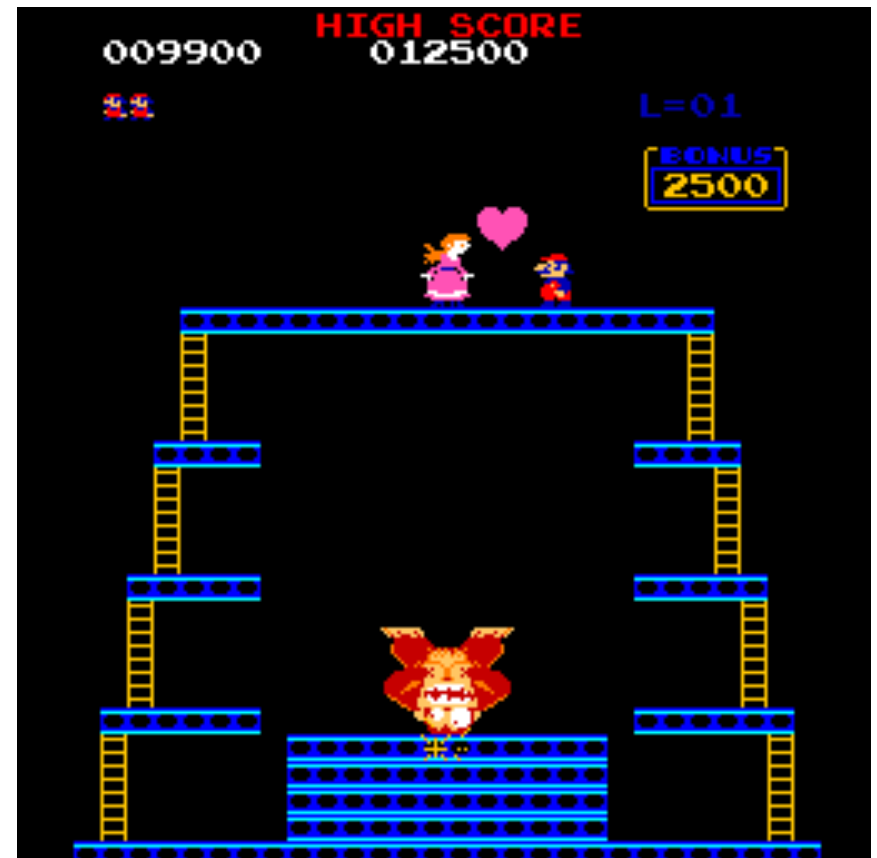


# Example: *Donkey Kong*

## Climax, Act III



## Denouement





# Gameplay vs. Narrative

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- **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

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- **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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- Storyline
- Dialogue
- Action
- Player choice

For a later lecture

# Characters: Agency vs. Empathy

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- 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



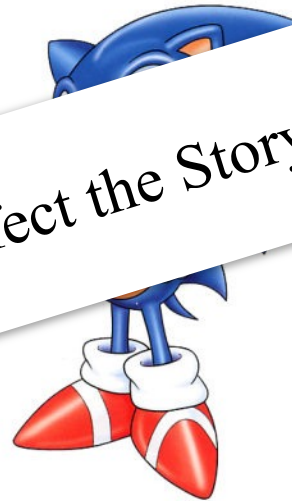
# Computer vs. Player Control

Computer Control

Player Control



How Does this Effect the Story?

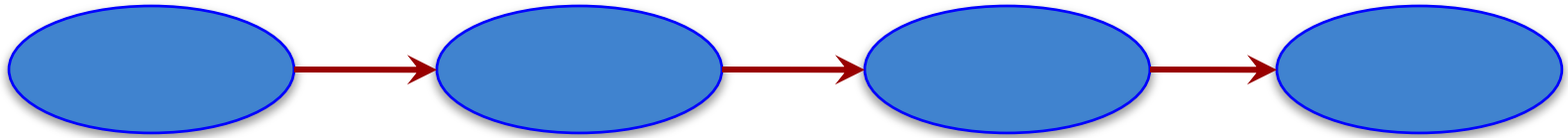




# Storyline

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



# Example: *Fractured 2*

Cinematic Mode Rate: ★★★★★ Favorite Playlist Like 0

# FRACTURED 2

START GAME  
CREDITS  
PLAY THE ORIGINAL  
MORE GAMES

GameMazing

SIGN IN TO YOUR ACCOUNT

Username or Email  
WalkerMWhite

Password (Forgot your password?)

Sign in Remember me

Not a member yet? [Join for free!](#) Sign in

# Example: *I Saw Her Standing There*

The screenshot shows a game interface with a top navigation bar containing 'Cinematic Mode', 'Instructions', 'Rate: ★★★★★', 'Favorite', and 'Playlist'. On the right, there is a 'Like 7' button and tabs for 'CHAT', 'GAME', 'ACHIEVEMENTS', and 'SIGN UP'. The main play area is a white rectangle with the text 'i saw her standing there.' in the center. Below the play area, there are two simple stick figures: a black one on the left and a pink one on the right. A mouse cursor is positioned between them. At the bottom left of the play area, the text 'Move' and 'WASD/Arrow Keys' is displayed. On the right side, there is a sign-up form with the following fields: 'Email Address' (with a checked 'Send me updates' option), 'Password (min. 10 characters)', 'When were you born?' (a dropdown menu), and 'Username (4-16 characters)'. A 'Create My Account' button is located below the form.

# Example: *I Saw Her Standing There*

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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.



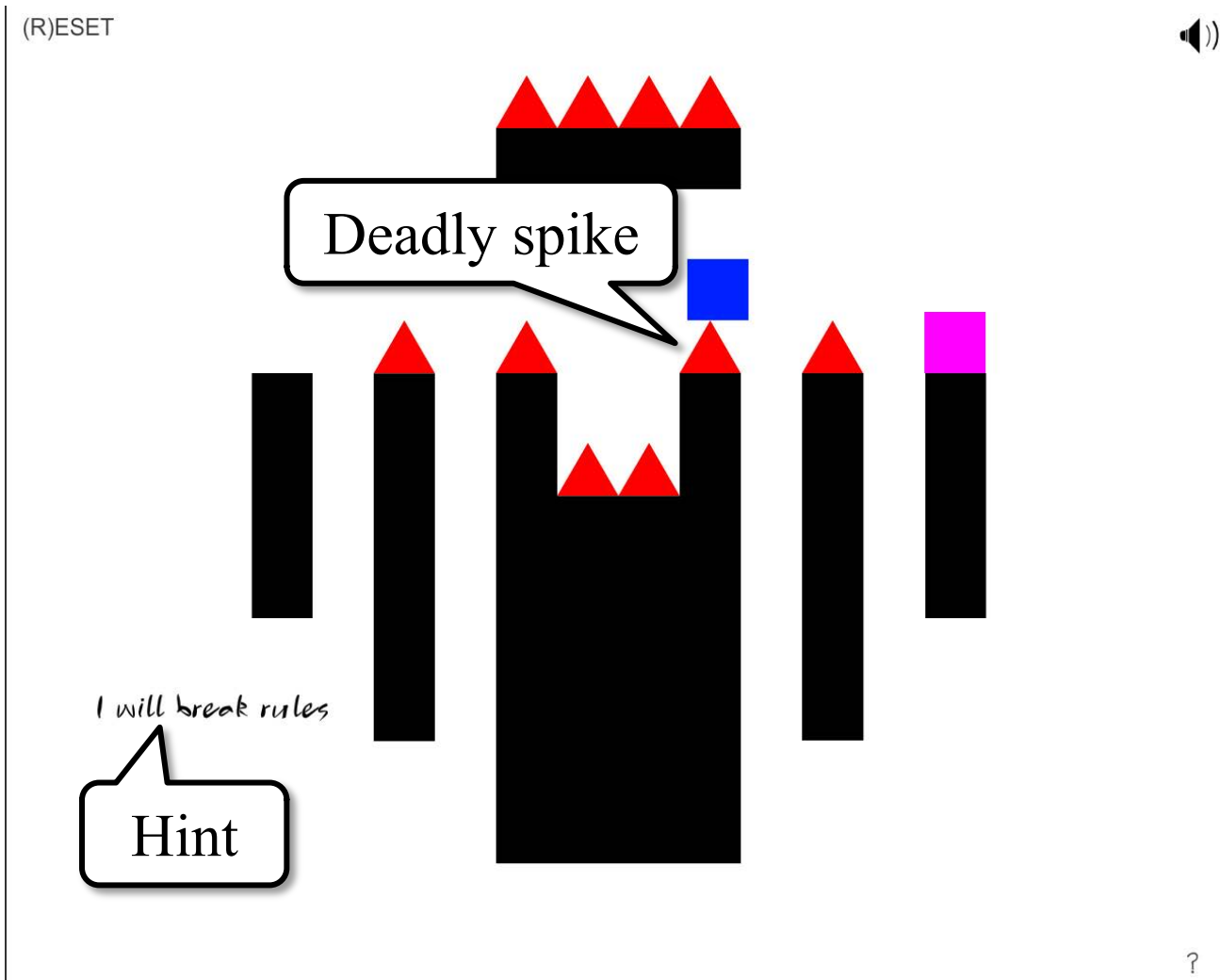
# Going Meta: *Pretentious Game*

The screenshot shows the title screen for 'Pretentious Game 3' within a game interface. At the top, navigation options include 'Mode Cinématique', 'Instructions', 'Noter: ★★★★★', 'Préféré', and 'Playlist'. A 'Like 3' button is visible in the top right. The main screen features the text 'A GAME BY KEYBOL' and 'PRETENTIOUS GAME 3' in a handwritten font. Below this are buttons for 'NEW GAME' and 'CONTINUE'. At the bottom, there are buttons for 'MORE GAMES', 'PRETENTIOUS GAME 1', and 'PRETENTIOUS GAME 2'. The 'SNAPBREAK' logo is centered at the bottom, with a mouse cursor hovering over it. At the very bottom, it says '2013 MUSIC FROM INCOMEPTCH.COM GYMNOPIEDIE NO. 2 BY ERIK SATIE' and a small 'M' logo.

On the right side, there is a registration sidebar with the following elements:

- Buttons: CHAT, JEU, SUCCÈS, S'INSCRIRE
- Section: **Become a Kongrate member for free!** (with a 'SIGN UP!' icon)
- Text: Inscrivez-vous pour sauvegarder vos badges, points et progrès. Cela vous donnera aussi le droit de recevoir des jeux vidéo gratuits et des prix. (*Déjà membre ?*)
- Form: 'Adresse e-mail' with a checked checkbox 'Mettez-moi à jour'.
- Form: 'Mot de passe (min. 10 characters)'
- Form: 'When were you born?' with a dropdown menu.
- Form: 'Pseudo (4 à 16 caractères)'
- Button: 'Create My Account'

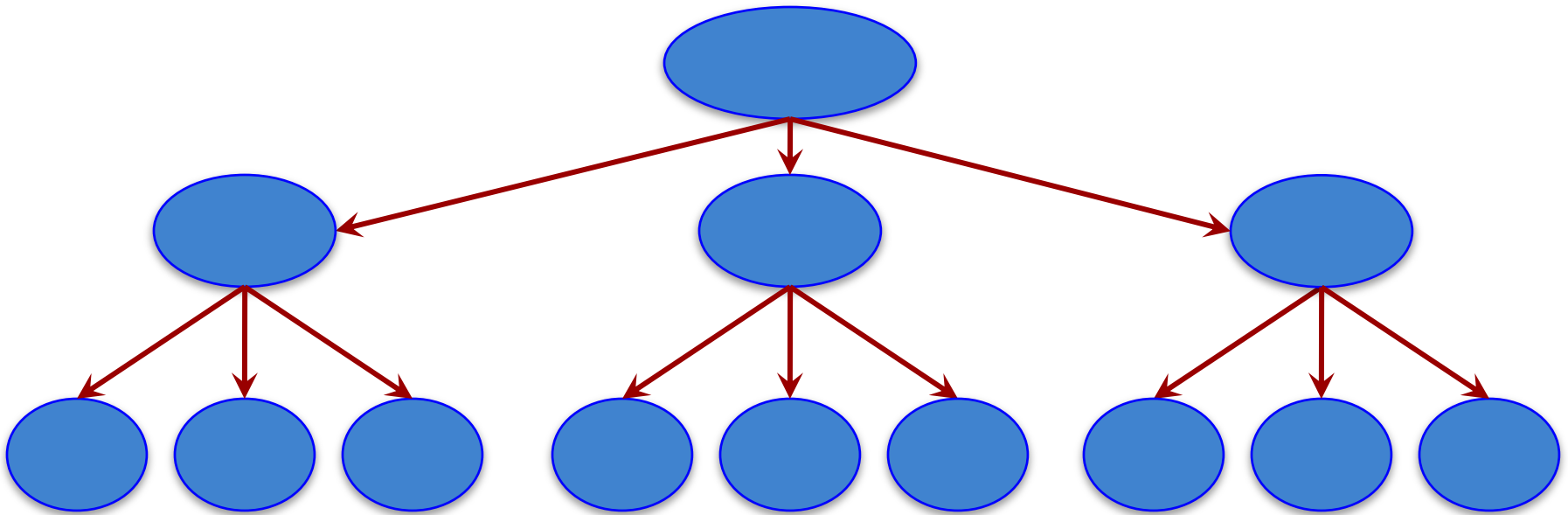
# Going Meta: *Pretentious Game*



# Storyline

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



# Example: Storyteller

The screenshot displays a game interface with a dark background. At the top left, there are navigation options: "Cinematic Mode", "Instructions", "Rate: ★★★★★", "Favorite", and "Playlist". A "Like 2" button is visible in the top right corner. The main content area is divided into three panels, each with a title and a pixel-art scene:

- ONCE UPON A TIME...**: A scene with a white castle, a boy, a girl, a girl in a purple dress, and a brown house.
- WHEN THEY GREW UP...**: A scene with a boy, a girl on a swing, a boy, and a black silhouette of a witch.
- THE END**: A scene with a boy, a black silhouette of a witch, and a black silhouette of a house.

On the right side, there is a sign-up form for Kongregate. The form includes the following fields and buttons:

- Buttons: "CHAT", "GAME", "MORE GAMES", "SIGN UP" (with a close icon).
- Text: "Become a Kongregate member for free!"
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- Button: "Create My Account".



# Example: *Storyteller*



Can move characters in each timeline


Affects state in other timelines

# Example: *Today I Die*



# Example: *Today I Die*

Can replace words in the poem



dead  
dark world  
full of shades  
today I die

painful

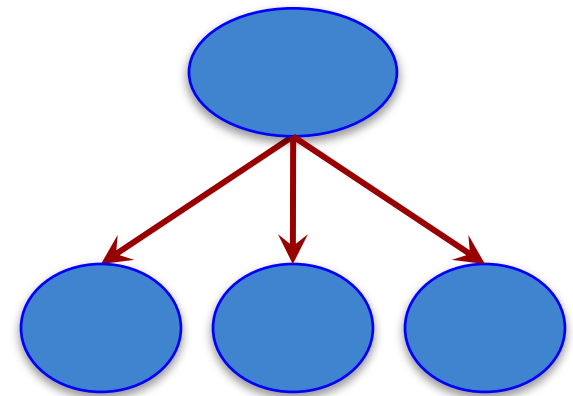
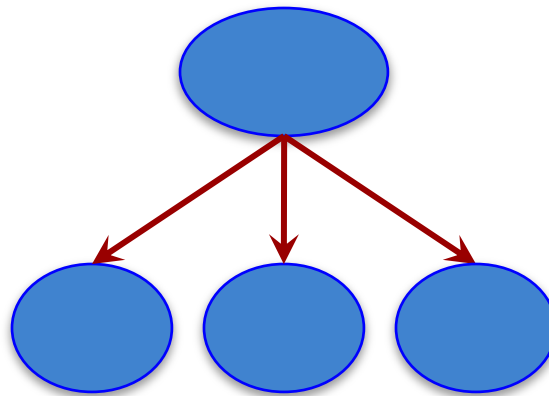
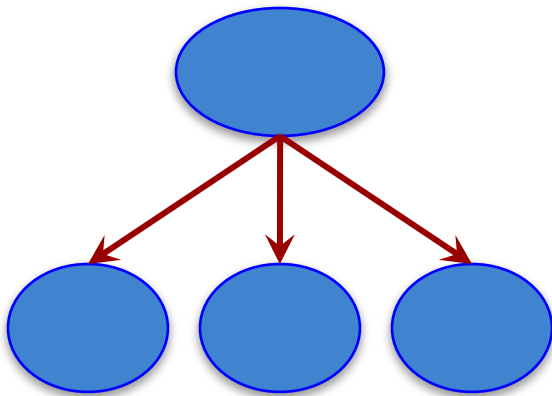
Affects state of the world

Used to be on App store. No longer available

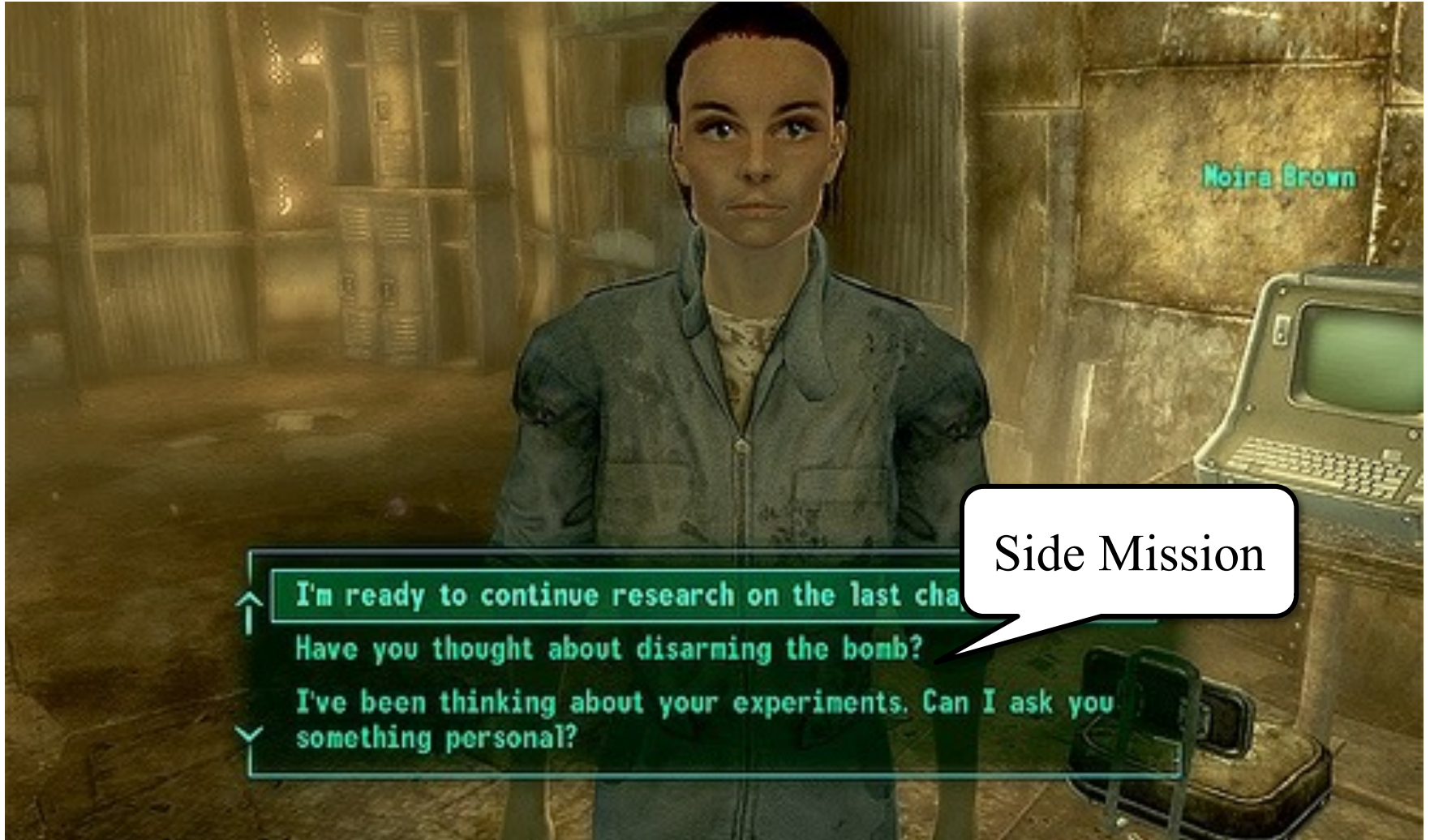
# Storyline

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- **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

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





# Storyline

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



# Meaningful Choice

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- 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

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- 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