

Storytelling for Games



ElectronicArmory.com
3D Game Development Course



Robert Denton Bryant & Keith Giglio

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Definitions

Protagonist - Hero

Antagonist - Villains

Anti-hero - a central character in a story, movie, or drama who lacks conventional heroic attributes.

Thesis - a statement or theory that is put forward as a premise to be maintained or proved.

Antithesis - a person or thing that is the direct opposite of someone or something else.

Synthesis - the combination of ideas to form a theory or system.

Storytelling is an emotional journey of your characters

The players have to invest emotionally in the journey you've laid out for them.

What is a story?

A story is a journey of emotion.

A game is a journey of action.

Stories in Games?

Not all games are equally story-driven. Generally, story matters more in representational (more realistic) games than in presentational (more abstract) games.

Conflict

Conflict can come from the environment, from other characters in the story, or it can be internal conflict such as guilt or self-doubt.

Villains

They think they're actually the good guys in the story.

World Building

Storytelling in games is more often a task of world building rather than plot writing.

There is an inherent conflict between storyteller and audience when you give the audience some control over the narrative.

Revealing Your Character's Story

Plot is character revealed by action.

5 Acts (Shakespeare)

ACT ONE—Introductions and Establishing a Pre-Existing Conflict

ACT TWO—A Turn or Reversal Which Deeply Worsens the Main Conflict

ACT THREE—A Major Turning Point. A Twist. A Surprise that Makes Things Worse.

ACT FOUR—The Spiral

ACT FIVE—Climax/Resolution

8 Acts (Sequence)

The sequence approach is another popular method of structuring your story. This takes the three acts and divides them into eight sequences, with each carrying a mini-objective that pushes toward the main objective.

**ACT
ONE**

Sequence A
OPENING

Sequence B
SETUP

**ACT
TWO-A**

Sequence C
NEW WORLD

Sequence D
MIDPOINT

**ACT
TWO-B**

Sequence E
DEVELOPMENT

Sequence F
CRISIS

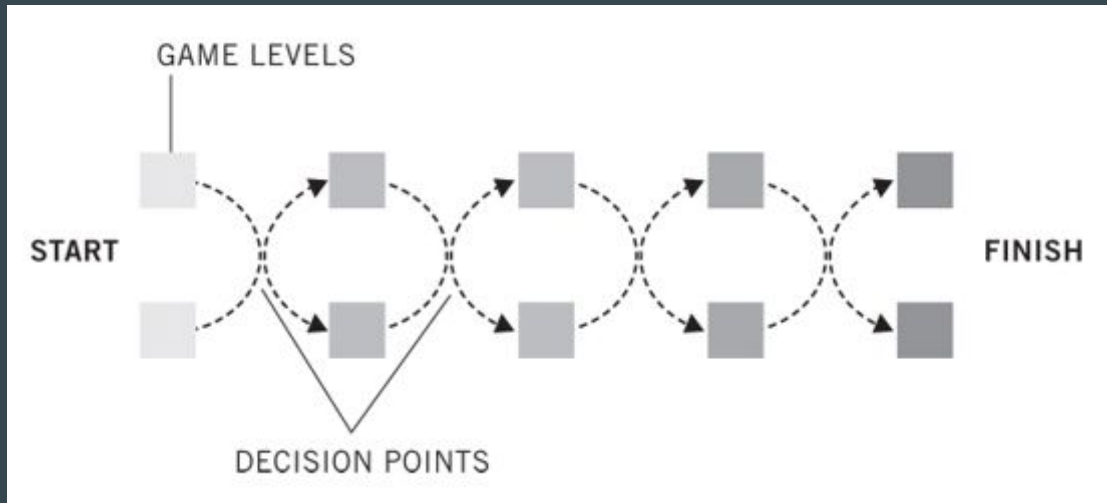
**ACT
THREE**

Sequence G
BATTLE

Sequence H
RESOLUTION

Parallel Narrative

A video game might have a parallel narrative. If all protagonists (players) are after the same goal, then they are on the same path and the story can move forward with each of them.



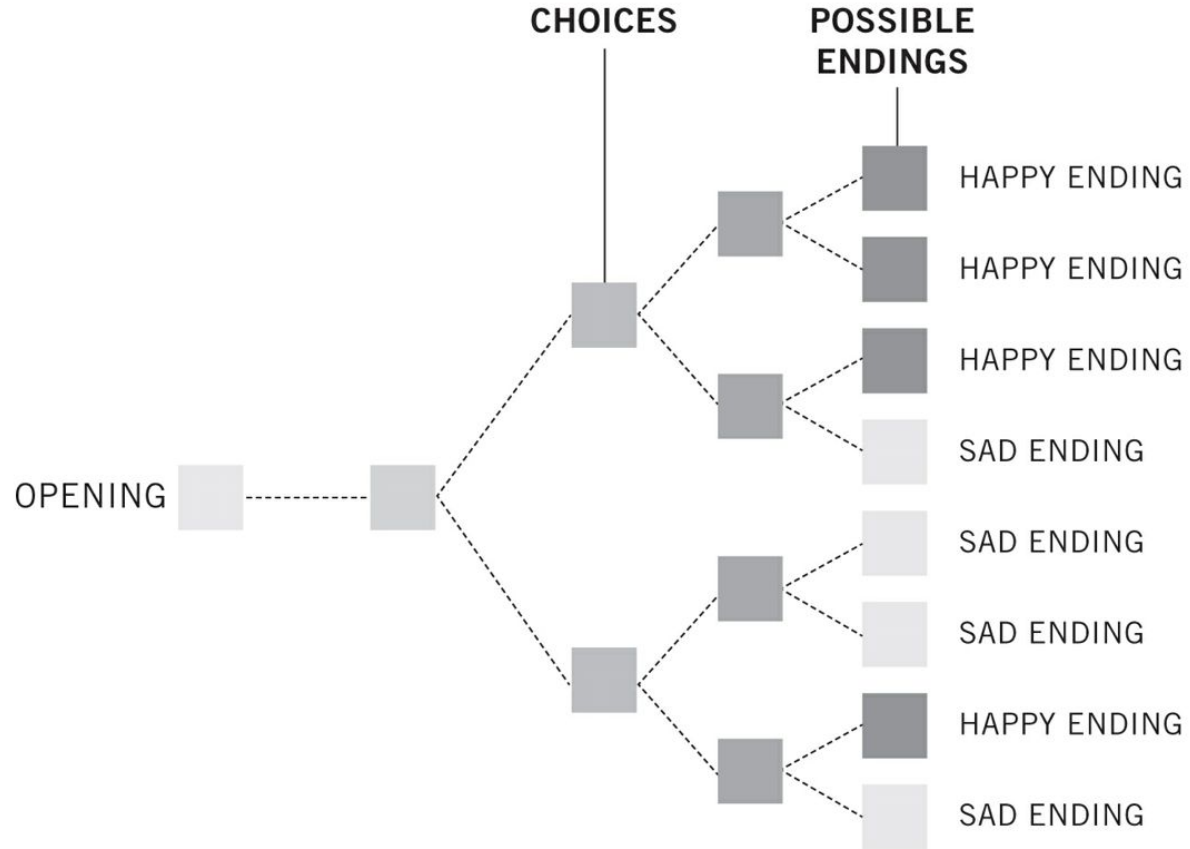
Branching Narrative

A branching narrative is a line of dramatic action that begins with the same problem but might end in any of a number of resolutions.

Think: beginning, middle, many endings.

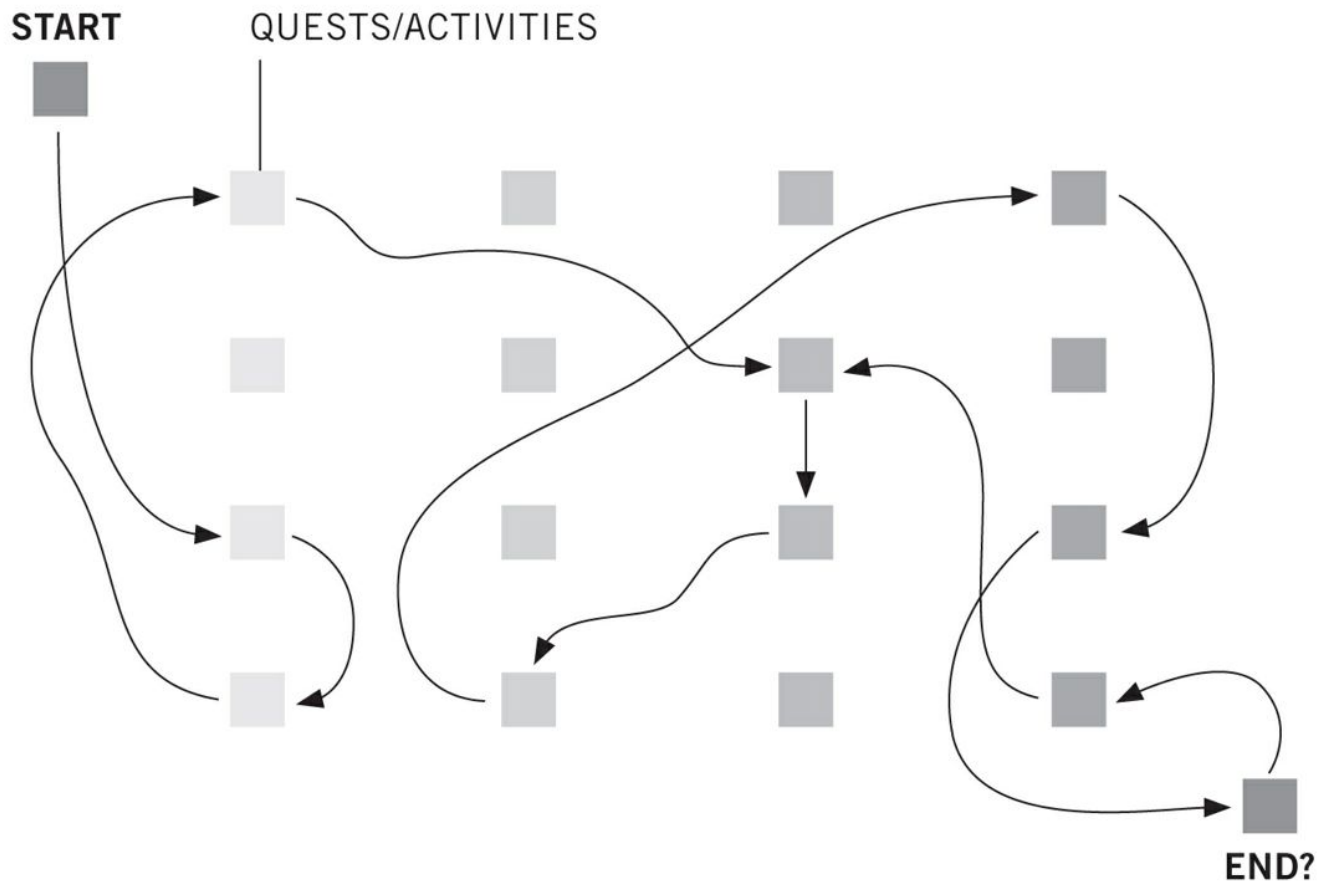
Ex: “Chose Your Own Adventure”

Interactive fiction (IF)



Non-Linear Narrative

There is a long tradition of excellent movies that play with the rules of linear narrative, subverting the audience's expectation of a straight shot through the story and presenting instead repetition (Rashomon), inversion (Betrayal), both (Memento), simultaneity (Timecode), and shuffling (Pulp Fiction).



Good Characters Change

A good story should result in the main character undergoing some sort of emotional transformation, or character arc.

In most stories, the plot is a vehicle that drives the protagonist to change.

If you want to write a great video game, create a character that goes on a journey of change. The journey of action should influence and affect the journey of emotion.

You want your protagonist to have the most emotional distance to cover over the course of the story. Your main character's arc should be long.

Your job is to get your character into tense situations. And lots of them.

Realistic Characters

If you want characters to be more “realistic,” make them screw up. Give them fears and prejudices. Make them flawed.

One of the best places to begin developing a flawed character is to develop an internal conflict. Internal conflict comes from an emotional dilemma that results in the opposition of want and need. What a character wants and what a character needs should be at war with each other.

External conflict is everything that is placed in the character’s path as he or she attempts to achieve their goals.

The trick is to create an internal conflict for your hero(ine).

Know Thy Ending!

Good dramatic writing is done backwards. To develop a strong emotional impact, the writer needs to know—in any story, for any platform—what the ending is!

Emotion is Key

If you can reduce your game to a primal emotion, then the player can relate on a visceral level. Primal emotions are feelings we experience in our guts: the love of family, the longing for safety, the will to survive, the urge for revenge, the temptation to hate.

Why, Why, Why, Why, Why?

Motivation is not just an actor's word. It needs to be the writer's word as well. Always ask yourself why?

5 Whys

The vehicle will not start. (the problem)

Why? - The battery is dead. (First why)

Why? - The alternator is not functioning. (Second why)

Why? - The alternator belt has broken. (Third why)

Why? - The alternator belt was well beyond its useful service life and not replaced. (Fourth why)

Why? - The vehicle was not maintained according to the recommended service schedule. (Fifth why, a root cause)

Where's the Fun?

Your game story is working if players, rather than clicking through the cut scenes to get to the gameplay, sometimes find themselves rushing through the gameplay to learn what happens next?

The essence of fun is ... surprise!

It is the challenge, the difficult-ness, the uncertainty of outcome, that makes gameplay fun.

Gameplay Mechanics to Support Story

You should think about gameplay mechanics as active verbs.

But a game mechanic by itself is meaningless. It needs the content.

Level Design

We approach level design from a narrative design approach. Let's figure out what drives the story forward and then figure out what goes on inside the levels.

What is the level? And then what happens inside the level?

Levels are like chapters in a book, episodes in a television show, or scenes in a movie.

A level is a contained environment where the player/protagonist must achieve a goal, or a series of goals, in order to continue with the story or game and advance to the next level.

Levels, quests, and missions should all be fractal—self-similar—in structure. Your main story has a beginning, middle, and an end, and so should each level, quest, and mission.

Level Design

Levels Need to Move the Story Forward

Levels Should Have Clear Objectives

Levels Can Have Multiple or Mini Goals

Levels Should Have Bosses

Levels Should Start with a Punch and End with a Flurry

Levels Should Increase Agency

Levels Should Provide Character Insight

Level Design

Levels Should Have Turning Points

Levels Should Foreshadow

Levels Should Be Fun

Goals in Levels

Once you define a goal for a level (know thy ending!) you should extrapolate its three-act structure: The Goal, the Complication, and the Resolution.

Or the Thesis, the Antithesis, and the Synthesis. Or, from a punctuation standpoint: ? ! and .

The ? of the level is always, what does the PC want?

The ! is all the obstacles that stand in the way of that goal.

The . is the resolution. Did the PC reach the goal? If not, what stopped him? How does he react?

Levels As Stepping Stones

Think of the levels as conceptual blocks that move the story forward.

The external story beats of each level make up the journey of emotion.

No ands but but!

The connection between one level and another should never be “and.” Use instead “therefore,” and “but.”

Because Level A, therefore Level B. Or, Level A, but (surprise!) Level B.

“Therefore” suggests that finishing the level will have unintended consequences.

“But” suggests that the next level begins with new information that will create further complications.

Grinding storylines

How many games have you played where the level objectives read like:

1. Go get the gnarled old walking stick, AND
2. Go get the dusty jewel, AND
3. Go find the rusty headpiece, AND
4. Take them all to the wizened wizard to reassemble into the Furious Staff of Rudeness, AND
5. Schlep the staff to the Ancient Split-Level Ranch-Style Temple in a Bad School District, AND
6. Use it to defeat the Undercaffeinated Temple Guardian, AND
7. Finally you get to enter the first dungeon ...

Cut Scenes

Cut-scenes should be setup and/or reaction scenes. They should set up the gameplay (battle) that is about to happen.

Emergent Gameplay and Emergent Narrative

Emergent gameplay means that the player has discovered a means of using the game's mechanics and systems to create gameplay that the developers may not have intended.

For example, keeping Dogmeat alive in the original Fallout or racing in two-car Saleen/MINI Cooper “Cat and Mouse” teams in Project Gotham Racing 2.

Emergent narrative, then, is motivating the fun of emergent gameplay with stories that you create yourself.